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NOVEL 1
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

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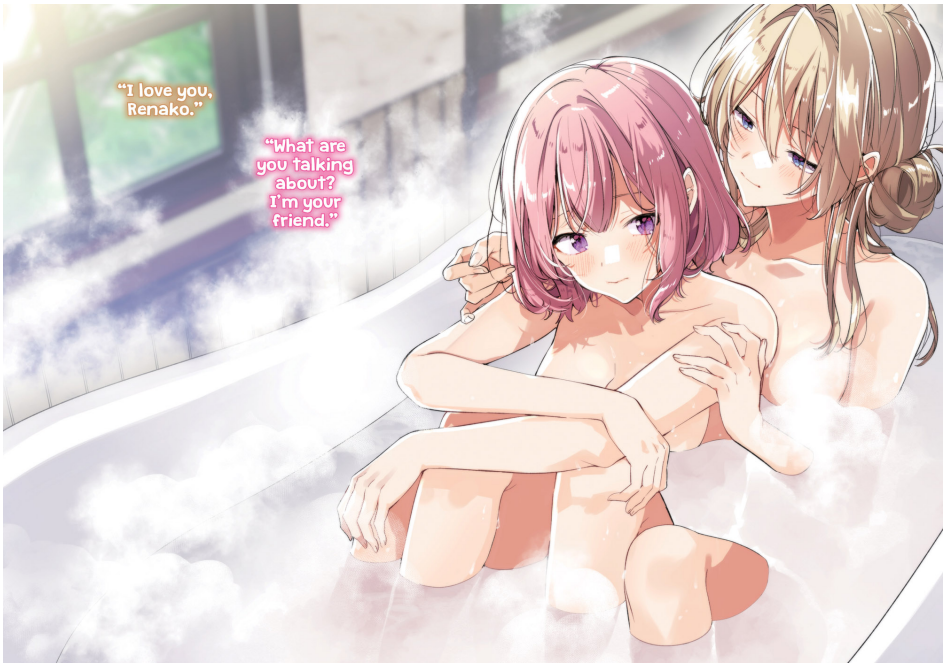
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

"I do apologize, but you're the only girl for me. I think I've fallen head over heels for you."
"WHA?"
AMAORI RENAKO
Had enormous success in reinventing her whole image at the start of high school, but deep down, she's not a people person. Had a loner phase in junior high.
ODUKA MAI
A flawless, gorgeous teenage girl the likes of which no masterpiece could ever hope to rival. Goes by the nickname of the supadari.
"Aww! Thanks for the unexpected compliment. You put a smile on my face."
KOYANAGI KAHO
The little sister-esque mascot of the group.
When Mai's whole friend group assembled, we made our corner of the classroom grow. We all stood out in the public eye.
SENA AJISAI
The class's archangel. Gives off lots of good vibes.
"I'm a Mai fangirl!"
"I'm not quite sure you're interesting enough to warrant that."
KOTO SATSUKI
A raven-haired beauty and a bookworm to boot.
Uh, well, I should say everyone except for me.


"I love you, Renako."
"What are you talking about? I'm your friend."

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EPILOGUE

There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless...

1

WRITTEN BY

Teren Mikami

ILLUSTRATED BY

Eku Takeshima

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-68579-626-6
Printed in Canada
First Printing: May 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

YUP. I couldn't do this any longer. No. Freaking. Way.

It was lunchtime. Feeling like a drowning person finally breaking the surface to gasp for air, I shouted, "Hey, guys!"

All conversation stopped, and four pairs of eyes turned to me.

Two of the girls in my friend group chorused, "What's up?" and, "What's the matter?"

"Are you okay, Rena-chan?" asked another.

Eeep! I raised my hand so that I did not in any way, shape, or form have to make eye contact with the star of our entire school who was sitting in our midst, Oduka Mai.

"Sorry!" I babbled as fast as I could. "I, uh, oh—I just remembered that there's something kind of urgent I need to take care of. You guys go on and eat without me. Sorry, sorry! I'll catch up with you all later!"

Then I booked it out of the classroom. Oh my god, they must have thought I was such a weirdo, but I seriously couldn't take another minute.

I speed-walked down the hallway, and the minute I got to the landing and saw that no one was around, I scrambled up the stairs as fast as I could. I didn't even care that my skirt was flying up, causing a draft around my legs. I was headed for the roof, where there'd be no one around but me.

I shoved the key into the lock and banged the metal door open. Finally, my field of vision opened up around me. I took a huge, deep breath and basked in the feel of the bright blue sky. What a relief. I could feel all my cells rejoicing in the taste of that sweet, sweet oxygen.

I closed the door behind me and tottered on heavy legs to the edge of the roof. The fence was so short it barely came up to my chest, but I curled my fingers around it and leaned out over the top. The hustle and bustle of the school below me sounded so far away that it was almost like I was in a different world. Phew! Hello again, my will to live.

I dangled there against the fence and let my knees hit the concrete. “I knew it,” I muttered to myself. “There’s no freaking way I’ll ever *not* be a loner.”

That cold, hard fact had really been hitting me these past two months—no matter how hard I tried, I was nothing but a big, antisocial loser.

My name’s Amaori Renako, and I did an amazing job of turning over a new leaf when I started high school this year. Back in junior high, I was your total average Joe. Or at least I was, until I messed up the whole having a social life thing. Then I stopped fitting in anywhere and became about as much of a loner as physically possible. Sure, I really missed having friends, but I tried to act like it was nothing big, like I was only alone because I liked it better that way, and I lived with that secret for the rest of my time in junior high.

But then, one day, I started thinking back on how fun elementary school was, and I got the idea to look up all my old classmates on social media and see what they were up to these days. Surprisingly, I actually found a couple of them. Seeing what they were doing with their lives brought back good memories, and I idly wondered if I should reach out and talk to them again. But no, there was no way I could do that. I was no longer the kind of person who could reach out and talk to people.

That night, as I lay in bed swaddled up in my blankets, I kept scrolling through my phone. They all had these amazing things going on in their lives: making expeditions to Harajuku to eat pancakes, shopping in Shibuya, getting crushes on so-and-so, attending tough club practices that would surely pay off since whoever was posting wanted to make the championships this year, and so on. My old friends’ lives were so ridiculously amazing that it just about broke my eyes to look at them. It was like they were all completely different people now.

But I didn’t have the time to moon over what massively different worlds we lived in. I took a good look at myself, me with my pajamas and my bedhead. Was the issue…that I just sucked?

Yikes! Major danger warning! If I kept this up, I’d be like this all throughout high school. Would I spend my entire life as an outcast from all the societal trends, a no-effort adult, just another cog in the machine, letting force of habit drain my stamina bar?

Nuh-uh. That was *not* happening on my watch! I lurched upright, filled with nausea and wanting to sob at this extremely realistic vision of my future. Muttering "oh my god, oh my god," all the while, I scrambled to look up "how to be a normal, extroverted person" and peered intently at the screen.

From now on, Amaori Renako was going to be a new girl! I was going to hang out with all the cute, popular girls, get super into gossiping about people's love lives, and scope out the sales at the department store makeup counters on the way home from school. I was even going to date someone awesome to make my time in high school the best it could be!

And just like that, I threw myself into this new aspiration. I started putting effort into my appearance, changed the way I talked, fixed my posture, and slapped a smile on my face. I molded and prodded myself like a misshapen piece of clay until I came out looking like a model teenager. I took an exam for a coed school outside my hometown where no one would know me, so that I could get a fresh start in life. When I was accepted, I bawled my eyes out in relief.

On the first day of school, even my little sister, the supreme social butterfly, gave me the thumbs-up of approval and said, "You're rocking this, oneechan!"

"Why, how nice," my mother added. "Yes, you look wonderful."

I was filled with relief. Sorry for worrying you with that junior high phase where I acted like a teenage dropout, Mom. *Now watch out, world, because Renako's about to fit in with the rest of the class and become the perfect cookie-cutter model of a teenage girl!*

I was ready to tackle the first day of school head-on. I set off, full of enthusiasm—time to be outgoing!—and then I met her. It was a date with destiny.

By high school student standards, Oduka Mai-san was a superstar. Her mom was a famous designer, and, heck, she herself worked as a professional model. And not only was I in the same class with her, but I got to sit right next to her!

Oduka-san was only three-quarters Japanese, so she was blonde,

blue-eyed, and drop-dead gorgeous. Naturally, this meant she stood out like crazy. Literally everyone was distracted by how stunning she was, and the whole class started buzzing with the rumor that she was actually some kind of princess from a far-away kingdom attending our school in disguise. I mean, I'd even seen her in magazines before! This girl was a literal celebrity!

At the time, I was still totally caught up in the hype of turning over a new leaf in high school, and so I decided to secure the best possible position from which to enjoy these next three years: right next to Oduka-san!

I came up to her and giggled. "Nice to meet you," I said. "My name's Amaori Renako. Um, do you think we could be friends?"

Instead of beheading this shameless commoner who dared to approach her, she turned to me with a smile as radiant as the sun. "Why, but of course," she said. "Thank you for coming up to talk to me. It's nice to meet you, Renako."

Oh. My. God. She nearly knocked me out with one single smile.

This girl was one of the prettiest in the whole country, and there she was calling me by my first name, a name no one but my family had called me since elementary school. I had no choice but to become a total fangirl.

So, yeah, with our very first conversation, I managed to become a part of Oduka Mai's circle of friends. I felt like it was a total fluke. This group consisted of five girls, and it went without saying that we occupied the top rung of the school's social ladder. Oduka-san talked to us like we were all equals, which was super surreal. It was like a whole other world where only super-duper popular and extroverted people lived.

I was really happy, then, because all of my new friends seemed like such nice, cute people. Little did I know of the tragedy looming over the horizon. Oh, Renako! How foolish and naive you were!

Everything was going great. No matter where I went, I heard people singing Oduka-san's praises.

"So, what do we all think about Oduka-san?" someone would say. "Though I'm sure the guys have to think she's the hottest girl in human history."

"Enh, I think we just look at things way too differently. To me it's like "Yep. She's still pretty again today. Got the sparkles going on and everything." and that's it."

"She's legit like some otherworldly fantasy being. And I wouldn't have expected it, but she's actually really nice and friendly when she talks to me. I feel like she's a loving monarch visiting her subjects on tour!"

Guys and girls alike were totally gaga over Oduka-san, and I occupied the enviable position of having her constant attention. If this wasn't being popular, then I didn't know what was!

Speaking of which, I should mention that it took no more than three days to crown our newly elevated monarch of Ashigaya High with the nickname "the supadari." Supadari—short for "super darling." You know, the kind of thing you'd call a perfect male character in a shojo manga or something. ("Darling" is used overseas for loved ones, regardless of gender, so it was still pretty fitting for Oduka-san.)

I was one lucky girl to end up in Oduka-san's friend group, with the girl who made flowers of love blossom here at Ashigaya High. It was the first time in my life I'd ever been so eager to wake up and go to school in the morning!

That was how the first two months of school played out. Time passed leisurely day after exciting, dreamlike day. It was everything I had ever wanted, and now it was here in my hands. And before long, I…got to the point where I couldn't take another minute of it.

Disaster struck because I'd dared to associate with those far above my station. The other four girls in our group were all cute, chatty, quick-witted, and amazingly good at picking up on social cues. I'm talking at least two standard deviations above the mean here in terms of people skills. But how could I, someone who was way below average in that department, possibly manage to fit in with them?

My secret? Uh…for lack of a better idea, working my butt off. I paid close attention to follow up with everything they said. I plastered a smile on my face for dear life and focused super, super hard to keep up with all their conversations, which moved so fast they made my head spin.

The result of my hard work? Coming home every night with my MP totally depleted and collapsing into bed. Welcome to day after day of agonizing over everything I said at school and counting my numerous slipups every night before bed!

Wait…is this what it means to be a social butterfly, like I've always wanted? I mused one night as I lay in my beloved bed, looking totally dead inside. I felt like an ugly duckling who'd wandered into a flock of graceful swans.

The answer was as plain as the nose on my face. Yup. An introverted loser like me never stood a chance at becoming an outgoing, bubbly girl in just two months. It was hopeless.

Still, I wanted so badly to keep hanging out with all the others, so I kept trying my hardest until my head felt as hot and stuffy as an overused cell phone. And then, on the day this story began, I finally broke down completely.

Leaning up against the rooftop fence after running from my friends, I closed my eyes partway and leaned into the wind with a sigh. “The breeze feels so good,” I murmured.

On my own like this, I didn’t need to worry about what other people were thinking of me. We were supposed to stay out of this place because the fence was low enough to be dangerous, but to me, the roof might as well have been heaven. It was the place where my brain could finally let off some steam. A place where I didn’t even need to think.

I sat there like that—eyes glazed over, mouth half open, my whole body drooping over the fence—and stared way off into the distance. As one of the school’s popular girls, I could never show this side of myself in class, but right now there was no one there but me. That all added up to one thing: my guard was completely down. My person switch was flipped to off.

Then I heard the sound of the door opening behind me.

Wait. The door? What? How? I was the only one who had the key, since the teachers trusted me, a member of Oduka Mai’s friend group, enough to be their helper. With that same blank expression on my face, I turned my head to see who it could be.

An absolutely stunning girl stood by the door, looking at me with shock in her eyes. Her long, blonde hair fluttered in the wind. She was tall. She was gorgeous. She shone so brightly you could see her from the moon with the naked eye. There was only one person in the entire school who this could have been. It was the one and only super teen Oduka Mai.

Her legs seemed to go on forever past her skirt, and there wasn’t an extra bit of weight anywhere on her. Her waist was so slim it made me wonder if she wore a corset under her uniform. Her small head accentuated the well-balanced proportions of her body so well that every single time I saw her, I thought she’d walked right out of a painting.

She gave me the most horrified look and then flew across the roof. “Renako, you mustn’t!” she cried.

“Huh?” I said.

She came at me in slow motion, both arms outstretched, with such a look of urgency that I freaked out. I didn’t even think. I just tried to get out of her way by pushing off of the fence, and, with a lurch, I

toppled right over it.

I yelped as I pitched forward and started to slip toward the other side. Oh no! Oh no! The ground of the schoolyard loomed up below. Was I legit falling off the roof? At this height? Was I seriously going to plunge dozens of meters and hit the ground head first? I could see the headlines already: “Society’s Dark Side: The Tragedy of a Young Girl Tired of the Constant Pressures of Human Interaction.”

And then, when it was almost too late, just as I was about to plummet off the roof altogether, someone grabbed my ankle and held on tight.

“I won’t let you do this!” she grunted. “Not right in front of me!”

“O-Oduka—”

She straddled the fence, pulled me into her arms, and then flung us both out into the air.

“-san?!”

For a moment I felt like I was suspended in midair, and then I was falling again. Wait. Was she falling with me?!

“You’re all right now, Renako,” Oduka-san murmured.

“We are literally falling?! Why did you jump? You totally just jumped off the roof!”

“Don’t worry.”

I said a second ago that she was hugging me, but it was actually more like she had me pinned tight in a nelson hold. Her voice, right up against my ear, sounded utterly calm even as we were falling to our doom. Wait a minute. Don’t tell me. Could she fly?

“You’ll be safe now that I’m here,” she said. “I’m lucky like that.”

“Are you kidding me?” I cried. “Luck is the most useless stat in every RPG!”

There was a huge rustling, crackling sound, and an impact shuddered through my body. A moment later, I realized we’d landed in a tree.

A branch caught me, and I flopped around it in a u-shape a good three meters off the ground. Now I knew what it must feel like to be a

fallen down comforter. I slowly raised my head. W-we were alive…

"See? We're safe, aren't we?" she said. "Nothing to i… N-nothing to it." Oduka Mai was sitting a bit farther up the same branch as me, legs crossed and completely unruffled. Like that, she would have looked right at home reclining on the side of a pool in some deck chair.

"Your voice is trembling," I pointed out.

"I knew there was a tree planted right here," she explained, "so I figured we could land in it, given the proper amount of momentum. Thankfully, my good luck handled the rest."

"If that's the philosophy you live by, you're going to end up dead one of these days."

It was a miracle that I fell off the roof and only had a bunch of scratches on my legs to show for it, but I had to wonder. How did Oduka-san escape unscathed?

My heart was still pounding like crazy. To be honest, I almost wet my pants back there. Bungee-less bungee jumping off a roof was way too frightening!

I instinctively sighed in relief. "Thank goodness we're alive."

Oduka-san nodded in fervent agreement. "At any rate," she said, "I'm glad I decided to follow you after you looked so odd earlier. If it hadn't been for that, you wouldn't be here right now." Her gentle, beautiful lips parted in a smile of heartfelt relief.

Uh, no…I think there's been a huge misunderstanding here, I thought.

"Uh, no, I…" I stammered out. "I wasn't going to jump or anything like that."

Mai looked up, breaking out of her self-satisfied grin and hand-to-the-chin pose. "Huh? Then why did you look so anguished?"

"I was just spacing out, that's all."

Oduka-san stared at me in disbelief. "That's what you look like when you're spacing out?"

What? Did zoning out really make me look that upset?

"But you went over the fence, didn't you?" she persisted.

"Only because you came running at me, and I tried to get away."

"Oh?"

"…And then I lost my balance and fell," I admitted.

The Amaterasu of Ashigaya High hid her face away behind the blocked cave door of her hands. "Which means," she said, "that I shouldn't have run after you after all. It's all my fault that you ended up in danger. You almost died because of me."

"Wait! No, but I'm happy that you were so worried about me, I guess! Even if I would have been totally fine in the first place if you hadn't come along!"

My babbling only made her fold into herself further.

"I see. So this all happened because I was too rash," she mumbled.

"No, that's not what I'm trying to say! Um—oh, gosh—uh, I mean."

I scooted up the branch and racked my brain for the right words. But here's the thing—if I knew what to say in those kinds of situations, then I wouldn't even have run up to the roof in the first place!

"It's not *exactly* your fault," I tried. "I'm pretty sure we could even say it's no one's fault. After all, I was kinda the one who caused it, right?"

The more I talked, the more she wilted, her natural radiance losing its luster. Oh my god, what was I to do now?

I screwed my eyes shut. "Um, so here's the thing!" I yelled. "I'm actually really bad at talking with people in big groups!"

To hell with all the fine details of communication! Oduka-san looked up at me with big, blinking eyes. "You think you're bad at talking?" she asked. "But you always act so cheerful and outgoing."

"Nuh-uh. Every time I have a conversation with someone, it completely drains all my MP."

She tilted her head in confusion at that last bit. Oduka-san probably wasn't much of a gamer. Ugh, I must have been making zero sense to her!

"I have like zero conversational skill!" I blurted out. "Unless I focus really, really hard, all your conversations feel like a super-fast basketball game where I never get the ball. I'm scared of awkward silences, so I always rattle on about the first thing that comes to mind, and I keep stealing other people's turns to speak!"

She looked even more confused.

“You don’t get it, do you?” I cried. “But you must have had moments like this, right? You know, like those nights where once you start cringing over every little thing you did wrong that day, you can never get to sleep… Wait, you mean you don’t do that? You’re incredible!”

I really meant that last compliment. I thought it was amazing that her social skills were so strong. I knew I could never be like her.

“So I was tired of it all and ran away up to the roof to recharge and get some me time to think things over. Because if I didn’t, I was actually going to die!”

My breathing was coming in ragged gasps. There’s a particular persuasive quality to a person who almost fell to her death saying she’s “actually going to die.”

Little Miss Perfect gave me a faint smile. “I see now,” she said. “That means that I’ve been making you do something you didn’t want to do. I’m sorry. I always thought we were having fun together. I really had no idea it preoccupied you this much, but I’m so sorry.”

“No!” I wailed. Of course this happened! Whenever someone says they’re bad at anything, it’s only natural for everyone else to feel sorry for them! I hadn’t meant to, but I’d only added fuel to the fire of her burning guilt.

I didn’t even think. I just grabbed her sleeve and said, “No, I like talking! It’s just a lot of hard work for me. But it’s still fun, I promise! It’s like sports, you know? They’re fun, but they also tire you out easily, ’cause I’m not as good at this whole conversation thing as you and all the other girls are.”

It was only then, when I got all this off my chest, that I realized I’d stunned Oduka-san into silence. Oh my goooooood. What in the world was I doing? Oduka-san must have been totally put off by me now. At this rate, tonight’s self-loathing session was going to be *extra* long, the ol’ up until 5 a.m. special…

Oduka-san stared at me with clear bewilderment in her eyes, but then, all the same, her mouth creaked open as if someone had pulled on tiny threads to part her lips.

“I see now,” she said. “I suppose it’d be rather arrogant of me to

say that I know exactly how you feel, but I've definitely had times when I've felt similar."

Wow. Was she just saying that…?

Well, maybe not. She was already looking down and away from me again as she went on. The girl in front of me was clearly a far cry from the confident girl I saw every day in class.

"As you can clearly see," she said, "I'm Oduka Mai. I'm very lucky to have many privileges, and I put in just as much effort to match that…or rather, I try to."

When she declared it so openly like that, I felt like I totally agreed. Oduka-san was incredible. She was absolutely stunning, super kind to everyone, and an all-around good person to the point of literally jumping off a roof to save me.

"Everyone enjoys having me around, don't they?" she said. "And that's because I do my best to make sure of that fact. It gives me pleasure to see everyone having fun. But sometimes, I feel like you do. I wonder if anyone is ever seeing the real me, and on some days, I just feel so alone."

"Oh."

"Perhaps I'm only acting as the Oduka Mai character everyone wants me to be."

For a moment, her eyes met mine, but then she quickly looked away again.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm always striving to be perfect, so it isn't right of me to say such nonsense. You must be so confused, I'm sure."

"No, not at all."

Her cheeks were flushed red in embarrassment. Even as my inner anti-social jerk whispered, "Okay, edgelord, go back to junior high," I really did consider what she said. The real her, huh?

"You know…" I began. "I think this is the first time I've ever heard you complain about anything." I guess I always assumed that Oduka-san, what with being showered with societal acceptance from birth, must be a total stranger to these kinds of anxieties.

Her skin, otherwise white as snow, darkened in an embarrassed blush as she murmured, "I've never talked about this to anyone before,

of course. Are you disappointed in me?"

"Huh? No, not at all!" And I really meant that. I shook my head to try to indicate that this was all totally normal. "I'm glad that I got to learn how hard you work to stay positive. That makes me think I want to work harder too, honestly."

Whenever I opened my mouth, I always ended up too wrapped up in what I was saying to look at the other person. "But it's so tiring, of course," I continued, "to keep working so hard every day, so that's why today I came up to the roof to escape."

Far, far above my head, the sun in the bright blue sky shone down upon the rooftop. I could barely believe we'd fallen from so high up and lived to tell the tale.

"Wait, why are we having this conversation in a tree, anyway?" I asked. "Oduka-san, if you want, you should come with me to the roof next time. We can take a break together. Just, this time, on the other side of the fence." Smiling desperately, I extended both arms to her.

"Really?" she asked. "Is that why you were on the roof? Oh, but no. I don't want to get in your way when you're taking a break, and besides, I already made us both fall because I misunderstood."

"I-I already told you, don't worry about that!" I pleaded with her, leaning forward. "No matter what mistakes you've made before, no matter how many mistakes you make now, I swear I'll accept you for who you are! Besides, I live my entire life making mistakes day in and day out. I'd be freaking done for if people couldn't be forgiven for making even a single mistake. So it's fine, because I'll be here for you!"

Why was I blabbering on again?

"If you keep thinking, 'Oh, I shouldn't be like this,' 'Oh, I can do better,' then you're just going to make things harder for yourself. It's really okay, I promise. It's okay to take a break every now and then."

I was smiling bitterly and spouting words like smoke, but Oduka's eyes swam. I knew then that these were the very things that I wished someone would say to *me*—that it was fine to drop the extrovert act from time to time. I wished I had a friend who would stick with me and tell me that.

"Wait, Oduka-san," I said. "Why are you tearing up?"

"Huh?" she said. "Oh, it's nothing. I'm just…very happy right

now, that's all."

"Huh?" I looked away, too embarrassed to meet her eyes. "W-well," I stammered. "I don't know, I guess that's just how I feel every so often."

Oh, great. Now I was the one crying! The makeup I did my best to put on every morning was going to run. I figured that the effect of surviving a fall off the roof was finally catching up with me. My knees were quaking!

"A-anyway," I said, giggling through my tears. "It might be kinda presumptuous of me to say that I want to be there to support the great Oduka Mai, but still!"

"It isn't presumptuous at all."

Whoa. As her blonde hair softly fluttered in the wind, she suddenly grabbed my hand. My heartbeat skyrocketed when her warm, pale, beautiful hands encircled mine, but it was more the power of her gaze that fixed me in place.

"I'm such a lucky person to be told these things," she said.

"Um. No, uh, not really, I mean. Um."

"I'm very glad I met you."

I gave a little shriek. All I was able to do was rattle off a bunch of tongue-tied, emotional ranting, but there she was shooting me straight through the heart with every word like a lover who knew just what to say for the greatest effect. Her earnestness mortified and almost blinded me.

"Oh, uh…" I stammered. "I feel the same way too! I want to be friends!" It was a heartfelt scream from the depths of my soul.

Oduka-san gave me a grin so warm and affable that it about made me melt. "Then let's be friends, Renako," she said.

"Huh? Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, I really do. Let's be true friends."

Sure, we'd been in the same friend group this whole time, but this was the first time I felt like I was actually connecting with her. I didn't even know what to call this feeling. Happiness? Yeah, happiness! Oduka Mai and Amaori Renako. The resident supadari and the mere plebeian turning over a new leaf for high school. We could not have been more

different, but now I couldn't help but feel like we were meant to meet each other.

That was why I took my free hand and placed it on top of hers. "Great," I said. "Let's be friends, Oduka-san. No, let's be friends, Mai!"

Mai immediately lit up. It's like there was a visible halo around her, a divinity so strong it was about to blow me away, but that was okay, because she was still there holding my hand.

After I grinned back at her, I took the key out of my pocket. "Feel free to come get me whenever you want," I said. "Then we'll go take a break."

She giggled. Her laugh itself was as innocent as could be, but the way she tapped her lower lip with one finger felt pretty suggestive. "This'll be our little secret," she said.

"Huh? Yeah, uh… I guess!"

We were both girls, but I still couldn't help reading a little too much into what she said. I guess it must have been because she was so pretty.

"Oh, but don't be so domineering with me, okay?" I said. "Because you'll make me nervous."

"Oh, nonsense," she said. "I'm never domineering at all."

"You liar! You're always walking around acting like you're right about everything!"

"Don't be silly. After all, I'm right about almost everything."

"That is *the* most you thing to say."

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined I'd someday be teasing Oduka Mai like that. She and I laughed openly. Honestly, if I could have continued to talk nonsense with Mai like that from then on, then I would have been so happy I couldn't have asked for anything else.

"At any rate," I said, "how're we supposed to get down out of this tree?"

Mai climbed down before I did and then caught me in a bridal carry. We'd fallen on the side of the school facing the hallways, so fortunately no one saw any of that whole ordeal go down. That must have been another example of Mai's luck.

We decided to return to class separately so as to keep our relationship itself another one of "our little secrets." I took a couple of deep breaths before I walked into the classroom. I'd already gone to the bathroom and plucked off all the leaves that were stuck on me, so I figured I must have looked okay.

Yet the minute I opened the door and tried to nod in greeting to my friends, they all rushed over.

"Oh, Rena-chan! What happened earlier? Are you okay?!"

"Huh?" I said.

"You ran out of here so fast!" said Ajisai-san, one of the members of our friend group. She, Kaho-chan, and even Satsuki-san all crowded around me. Yikes! It was a squad of extroverts.

I wasn't used to being in the spotlight, so I panicked. "Oh, uh," I stammered. "I just kinda felt weird earlier, uh…you know what I mean?"

Thanks to Mai, I had the power to go back and try my hardest to fit in with these social butterflies. Now that she was there, I knew I'd be okay. I could come up with an excuse on my own! I could! …Wait, I think my stomach was starting to hurt again!

Just then, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Mai, who had returned to the classroom before me.

"You weren't feeling too well, right, Renako?" she said. "But you said you had something to do so that none of us would worry, right?"

"Huh?" I said. "Uh, no, um…"

I mean, that was certainly one way of putting it, but not the *right* way necessarily. Mai swooped in with a smile for poor, bewildered me.

"Wha—" I squawked.

Her eyes crinkling into happy crescents, she beamed with so much charisma that all I could do was shut up and nod woodenly in response. I could not believe that this girl was actually my friend. She was legitimately the coolest.

As the day went on, I kept catching Mai's eye, and every time she threw me a grin that warmed my heart.

A group of girls in pretty clothes mobbed her, but Mai just smiled happily at them all the while. “Hey, Oduka!” one of the girls said. “Someone asked me for your number again.”

“Oh yeah, me too!” cried another. “Oh, and the other day, do you remember that guy waiting outside for you to leave? Wasn’t he from another school, even?”

“But of course,” Mai said. “After all, there’s only one Oduka Mai in the world.”

That girl was incredible. I could practically see a whole rose garden springing up behind her.

“You know,” said one of the girls. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re totally out of his league… Y’know, if I’m gonna be honest, I kinda feel like the fact that you’re a girl isn’t a deal breaker for me.”

“Huh? I didn’t know you batted for that team.”

“Only ’cause this is the supadari we’re talking about.”

A group of the popular boys saw the girls enjoying themselves and came up to join in the fun. Pretty soon, Mai’s rose garden was replaced by a crowd of people. Yet even in the midst of all that hubbub, Mai happened to catch my eye as I sat a bit of a distance away from them, and she smiled at me. I made a strange noise.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Rena-chan? Does your stomach hurt again?”

My friend looked on in concern as I fell flat across the desk and writhed in agony. Whoops. Sorry. It was just that Oduka Mai, literally the most popular girl in the whole school, was my secret friend. This legit felt like a dream. For all my life up until now, friendship had been some vague, undefined concept, but now that hazy idea was replaced by the very real Oduka Mai. Oh man, I really hoped that she and I would end up getting even closer! Sure, this was really jumping the gun, but still. Maybe someday I could become her very best friend in the whole wide world…but, hah, sure, like that was ever going to happen!

I was still walking on clouds, daydreaming about that cheesy crap, when everything turned on its head. It was the next day at school, and we were up on the roof. My eyes about shot out of my skull as if someone had crashed two cymbals together right next to my ear to wake me up. Because Mai was standing right in front of me, blushing

bright red and unable to meet my eyes, and she said—

“I do apologize, but you’re the only girl for me. I think I’ve fallen head over heels for you.”

I went silent.

Oduka Mai said she had a crush on me right in broad daylight.

“Wha—?” I said.

Wait. What happened to being friends?!

Chapter 1:
There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover!

THE FIRST PERSON in my whole life who'd ever asked me out was none other than the girl everyone called the supadari.

"No, no, no, no," I said. "No way. No freaking way!"

It was after school, and I came up to the roof so that no one could watch me where I now stood clutching my head. All the hustle and bustle of school getting out was making me retreat into my shell, but the girl right next to me was determined to draw me out again, and she glowed brighter than the sun in the deep blue sky. She was making her presence very, very known.

"Why not?" she asked. "You don't have a crush on another girl instead, do you?"

"No, but that's not the point!" I cried. "And why did you even follow me up here in the first place?"

"Because you were beating around the bush instead of answering me," she explained. "I knew it was only going to keep me up at night if I was still worrying about it, and that'd be a big issue for me."

"Oh my god," I groaned in defeat. All it took was one look at her with her amazing features and I became a nervous wreck. My brain was only working at half-capacity. I'd just started to slowly warm up to the concept of us being friends, and then she'd seized the initiative and dropped this bombshell on me.

"And anyway," I persisted, "this whole head over heels thing. Isn't it too soon for that? We literally only started talking yesterday."

"That's true," she said, and she leaned against the fence. She hadn't tied up her long, blonde hair, and it waved in the breeze. "But you were the first person I've ever shown my weak side, and you accepted me for it, didn't you? Even after I went home, my heart wouldn't stop pounding whenever I thought of you. You really made an impact on my life, you know. And then I had a moment of self-awareness and realized what it meant. That I've fallen for you."

"You have to be exaggerating," I insisted. I was standing there

with a total “oh my freaking god” look on my face as she ecstatically sung my praises. “Look, you’re Oduka Mai. Anyone would try to make you feel better if they saw you upset.”

“But at that moment, it wasn’t just anyone,” she said. “It was you. You were the one who was there for me.” She pierced me with her powerful gaze, and I was just as moved as if she’d suddenly grabbed me and pulled me into her arms.

“Okay,” I said, “that’s not really the right takeaway here, but okay. That’s still no reason to jump to telling me that you like me right off the bat.”

The glaring reality that the girl standing directly across from me actually liked me was starting to sink in, and my cheeks reddened. I turned away to hide my embarrassment, but Mai got the wrong idea.

“I knew it,” she said. “You like me back, don’t you?”

“No! I’m your friend! I like you as a *friend*, okay?”

It was already embarrassing enough calling her by her first name, and besides, we’d really only talked like this today and yesterday. I was aware that I’d just spouted off a pretty cheesy line, but then Mai went and had the worst possible reaction to it.

“That can’t be right, Renako,” she said. “You like me as a lover.”

“This baseless self-confidence makes you the worst person ever to argue with, you know that?”

I, the lowly peon that I was, tried to creep away from Mai and put some distance between us. She was trying to brainwash me. *Be strong, me!* I reminded myself.

“Why are you so reluctant?” she asked. “Is it because I’m a girl?”

“Well…I don’t know,” I admitted. I could imagine there were probably quite a few girls out there who wouldn’t have minded dating a girl so long as it was Mai, in all her tall, three-quarters-Japanese, professional-model glory. Plus, she was rich and super kind. She was the prettiest girl in our grade, and even if you threw all the guys into the mix, she was probably the handsomest person in the class too. Even her athletic skills were top notch—she leapt off the roof, after all. She really lived up to that supadari nickname. Wait, but remember, this had nothing to do with whether *I* liked her or not.

“Then that means I have a chance after all,” she said.

“No, you don’t!” I yelled. “There’s no way! No freaking way!”

And don’t give me that innocent look and get right up in my face, dammit! I thought. Because it was making my heart go into overdrive! Once again, I turned away from the intensity of her beauty worming its way into my personal space.

“Look,” I said. “I want us to be friends. Best friends who spend all our time in high school together.” Yeah, that really did sound like the perfect school experience to me. Sure, maybe I would have liked to date someone later down the line, but not at the moment. My mind was set on having fun with Mai by going places with her, maybe inviting her over to my house every so often to play games, that kind of thing. I wanted to hang out with her every day and have fun in *that* sort of sense.

Yet Mai sounded surprised when she said, “Seriously? That’s all?”

“What do you mean, that’s all? Look, being someone’s girlfriend isn’t a step up from being her best friend, okay? They’re two totally different things.”

“But, Renako, it’s kind of messed up that you’d rather be best friends when the girl you like tells you that she has a crush on you, don’t you think? When you say you like me, does that mean you want all the physical aspects of a relationship without us actually dating? Don’t you think that’s rather…dishonest?”

I could not even remotely follow her train of thought!

“You’re so stupid!” I yelled at her. “Why do you keep insisting that I like you in the first place?”

“Who *doesn’t* like me?”

“Oh my god!” I groaned. “You’re an idiot. You’re an absolute idiot, Oduka Mai!” What was with this girl? Why the heck did I think yesterday that she and I would be able to get along with each other? I had no idea anymore. “Listen up, and I’ll lay it all out for you! We’ve just barely started high school, right? But if we date and then break up, things are going to get really awkward, and I’m going to have to find a new friend group and everything. Neither of us want that! That’s why I flat-out refuse to get involved in such an unstable relationship with you.”

Mai smiled oh-so gently at me, like she was soothing a fussy

toddler. “I see now,” she said. “I understand your concern. That’s why you want us to take a step back and just be friends. That’s a very cute idea, but you don’t have any reason to worry. We’ll just never break up!”

My god, if only I had her level of confidence!

“No matter how amazing you are,” I said, “there’s no guarantee that things’ll work out that smoothly. Feelings can sometimes suddenly fizzle out, you know.”

“Why, has that happened to you before?”

I jolted in alarm. There was a puff of breeze, and Mai plucked up one of her locks of golden hair. She held it in her mouth like a rose and aimed an audacious smile in my direction.

I turned to her woodenly and, my lips pursed into a pout, mumbled, “Not…exactly.”

Yup, that was me, Amaori Renako. Single for as long as I’d been alive.

When I confessed the truth to her, Mai snorted.

That set me off. I yelled, “Well, it hasn’t! But that’s just how high school romances work, right? I’ve never heard of anyone who started dating in their first year and stayed with the same person their whole three years of school! Anyway, what about you? Have you ever dated anyone, huh?!”

Mai put a hand on her chest and confessed, as sincerely as a maiden vowing to marry a deity, “Of course not. Not a soul.”

“See! I knew it. I knew it!”

“But I know that the first person I date will also be my partner for life.”

“Fat chance of that happening!”

And quit blushing and hugging yourself! Good grief, girl!

My shoulders heaving with my wild breathing, I glared at her. “No matter how we approach this,” I said, “we’re never coming to an agreement.”

“That’s exactly right,” she said. “I have full faith that we won’t ever break up, whereas you seem to be under the impression that we inevitably will. And so you stubbornly insist that we’d be much better

off as best friends instead."

"I'm not sure I love the word choice there, but close enough."

Mai fell silent for a moment. To be honest, her asking me out was trouble enough on its own. I mean, I couldn't even handle hanging out in a group of friends, and then she was telling me she wanted to add the trouble of dating on top of that? No freaking way, hands down. I'd never had a crush in my life. What was a date anyway? Like, a kind of fruit, right? That's the level I was at. The hurdle I'd have to leap in order to become Mai's partner was way too high.

But maybe there was still hope for us as friends. We could stop by cafés after school, go hang out at places together, share common interests and whatnot. Even I had managed that level of friendship before, and I knew it was enough to give me all the happiness I needed. Although my friends in junior high had always left me out of those kinds of things…

Whatever! My point was, I wanted Mai to understand that we should have been best friends, not girlfriends.

The June breeze caressed Mai's hair. She pushed away those long strands that reminded me of threads of light and opened her mouth. "In that case, let's make a compromise."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Mai didn't seem to have a single worry about our strange relationship status. Her beautiful smile never faded as she laid out her suggestion. "I want us to date, whereas you want us to just be friends. But relationships are a two-way street."

"I mean, yeah. That's true."

"So what if I said there's no point to being friends if we can't be lovers? If I asked you to never talk to me at school again, would that upset you?"

"Um, I mean…" My heart pounded wildly in my chest. I was struck with the horrible sensation that the world was crumbling apart under my feet. Did she mean that she was going to abandon me?

"That would…really upset me…" I admitted.

Seeing my eyebrows bunch together in helpless worry, Mai rushed to amend her statement. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was joking just now. Of course I don't want to hurt you in any way. I promise."

“Gotcha… I’m okay, don’t worry. You just kind of shook me up a bit, I guess.”

“Okay. But, I mean, that is kind of how I feel. I hope you can understand how painful it’d be for me if I had to continue being friendly to someone who’d turned me down, right?”

“Well…yeah, I guess.” I didn’t get it exactly, but I was sure it couldn’t feel good. “So, what was that about that compromise?”

Mai nodded as if she had full faith that this amazing plan of hers would work out in both of our favors, crushing my will to resist. “Oh, that’s right,” she said.

Mai laid out the rules for a contest, and it was hands down the most bonkers thing I’d ever heard. On one day, we’d be best friends. On another, we’d be lovers. Then we’d each take turns trying the two roles out. And, oh yeah, we were also competing with each other to see if we were better suited as friends or girlfriends.

After I got home, I ran myself a bath and then zoned out and stared up at the ceiling as I soaked in the tub. I’d been in the habit of shutting myself up in the bathroom and doing my heavy thinking from the tub for a long time now. As I soaked in the cooling water, I grabbed my chest—I was kinda surprised at how big it had gotten lately—and jiggled it in my hands a bit, like this whole thing was getting to be too much of a handful.

“Hot damn, girl…” I mumbled to myself.

I wasn’t talking about my body. I was talking about the fact that ever since that whole scene on the roof, Mai’s smile had been burned into my retinas. The fact that she looked like a queen was really no fair. Plus, she was up and getting in my face earlier. The impression she’d made was way too powerful.

The day before, we were friends, and today she’d told me she had a crush on me. And then now…

“Do I want to be her friend or her lover?” I asked myself.

I thought back to what Mai told me up there on that roof in the lovely early summer sun. *On the days when we’re lovers, I’ll show you what it is that makes dating so wonderful. And, if even then you think it won’t work out for you, I’ll take it like a big girl and back off. Because that means my charms weren’t enough to win you over.*

Then best friend days were the reverse, where I'd present to her all the joys of being best friends. It was like having a demo version of being friends and lovers both, and whoever made the other one go, "Yeah, okay, I think I like this kind of relationship better," would come away the winner. From then on, we'd spend the rest of our time in high school in whatever relationship we'd both agreed on.

"Hot damn, girl, what have you gotten yourself into?" I groaned. I slid down in the bath until the water covered my mouth, and blew bubbles up into it.

Relationship: The Demo was supposed to run throughout the month of June, meaning that we would go at this for a month. I was *not* about to accept her as my girlfriend, so defeat was not an option. That being said, though, it seemed equally hard to change Mai's mind on the subject.

But I'd never get anywhere if I gave up right out of the gate. Besides, I'd made up my mind to change myself for the better, and that meant that I could surely pull off a win against Mai.

Okay! I surged up out of the bath armed with new motivation. "I refuse to go back to being a loner!" I cried. "I'll win and get the best high school experience a girl could ask for!"

My sister overheard me whooping and hollering alone in the bath and muttered, "And just when I thought she was finally getting herself together…"

But I was not about to lose heart, not even when she looked at me with pity in her eyes!

Thus, my month-long battle with Mai began.

***

Mai offered to change her hairstyle up from day to day to make it easy for us to tell if we were going to be girlfriends or regular friends that day. When she wore it up in a ponytail, it meant we were friends. When she wore it down, we were girlfriends. This made me feel like we were playing some sort of secret game with just the two of us, which, to be honest, was actually kind of exciting.

But then it was on lunch during the first week of June, three days after the battle had begun, when Mai came along with me to the vending machine in the courtyard to buy a soft drink. I made no effort to hide how royally ticked off I was and dragged her into the empty girls' bathroom.

"Oh my," she said with an amused little chuckle. "Do you really want alone time with me that badly?"

"No!" I said. "Okay, I mean, yes, but—not in that way!"

I checked that we were indeed alone in there and then rounded on Mai. "Cut it out, Mai!" I hissed in a low voice. "Put your hair up already! Why on earth have you been wearing it down for three days straight?"

Mai chuckled and brushed the bangs out of her face, practically bringing lilies into bloom inside this run-down girls' toilet. "Just look," she said. "Not even a hint of bed head and as straight as the day is long. Wouldn't it be a shame to tie it up?" She flipped it over the back of her hand to let it flutter over her shoulder like a girl in a conditioner commercial. Her smooth hair glittered with the reflection of the lights.

"But then this is hardly a contest," I pointed out.

She twirled one strand of that long hair around her finger and nodded. "Yes, but we've been friends for two whole months now. Isn't it only fair to even the scales by having more girlfriend days?"

As she said that, her arms encircled my waist. *Huh?!*

"H-hey!" I yelled. "Watch it!"

"What's the problem?" she asked. "We're lovers today, so we should act like a couple."

"W-we're at school. What'll we do if someone sees?"

"I don't mind."

Just the slightest touch of her hand on my waist prompted a sharp reaction. Sure, teenage girls often get all touchy-feely when they run into each other and stuff, but this hand clearly had other intentions. It told me that this was a matter of attraction, and it wasn't playing around. This, her hand said, was serious.

"W-well, I mind," I stammered. "And I mind what you're doing with your hands."

Her finger tapped my waist before slowly moving lower and lower. She almost made it to my butt before I finally moved and threw this vision of loveliness's slender arm off of me.

"What do you think you're doing, getting all handsy on me? I didn't think you were the kind of person to feel someone up. Or what, do you really like me that much?" I snapped at her.

I meant this as a way to shut her down, but she just took it in stride and said, "Yes, I do like you that much."

That was too honest! TMI! This girl…this freaking girl… Look, that was enough to make anyone blush, okay?

Mai didn't pause and instead stroked my back again. She grinned at me with a smile so sunny and overjoyed that you could have mistaken her for a golden retriever. I almost felt like she was scent marking me.

"I can't be *that* good," I mumbled. "I don't get this at all."

"Oh, I see now," she said. "You're trying to make me think you have poor self-esteem, but this is actually a ploy to get more of my compliments and affection. You're just pretending to not like me back as you pull these clever tricks. Isn't that right?"

"You are so wrong! I swear every single part of what I just said is true. Stop making me out to be someone who goes around tricking people!"

I wriggled free from her clutches once more. This was starting to feel like a kung fu movie at this point!

"Look," I said, "there's no freaking way this will work, and it's because you're always like this."

"Like what?"

"This ridiculously confident! You always go around acting like everything's going to go your way. But if you think that all you need to do is be a bit more forceful and I'll roll over and let you have what you want, then you've got another think coming."

What I'd learned from those past three days was that you couldn't do any kind of beating around the bush with Mai. If you meant no, you had to say it or else she'd twist your words into whatever best suited her whims. Yelling at Mai like this was a part of my offense against her. Up until now, I had always scrutinized the faces of the girls in my friend

group to try to figure out the appropriate responses and the right time to use them. The old Renako, who always did her best to blend in with the crowd and go with the flow of conversations, stood no chance of going toe-to-toe with Mai in a verbal battle!

Mai put a hand to her chin and said, “I see.” Her eyes seemed to question why this lowly peasant was so angry when told to let them eat cake. “But everything *has* gone my way.”

I was at a complete loss for words. Oh my god, Oduka Mai.

Unfazed by even the cold armor of rejection, Mai gracefully patted me on the head and said, “I won’t give up on this, so you’d best surrender.”

I threw off her arms for the third time. “For crying out loud! Before we even think about being best friends or lovers, we really need to do something about this presumptuous streak you’ve got going on. You can’t do whatever the hell you want, okay?”

Mai looked at me in surprise for a moment, but then her expression relaxed into a smile. “Language, Renako. That’s no way to treat your partner, now is it? You should try to be a better girlfriend.”

“I mean, I guess not,” I admitted. “Oh, but does this mean you don’t want to be my girlfriend any longer?”

“Nope. If anything, I like you all the more.”

“But why?” I spluttered.

I held my head in my hands, and Mai tittered gracefully.

“You’re the one person who doesn’t let me have my way all the time,” she said, “and it’s fun. Besides, whenever I’m with you, I feel like I become more selfish by the minute. Please continue to call me out on that, Renako.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do anything that needs calling out!”

She just smiled in the face of my fury. I couldn’t make heads or tails of that girl!

After this intimate conversation with my loving girlfriend (this is sarcasm), I went back to the classroom.

“Welcome back!” called Sena Ajisai-san, one of the girls in my friend group. “Hey, Renako-san, here’s a question for you. Would you

rather date someone who's kinda ugly but really rich or someone who's a hunk but totally broke?"

"Huh?"

She looked up from the magazine spread open on her desk—evidently, that was where she'd gotten the question from—and beamed up at me. "I know I asked, but to be totally real with you, I don't really care about how much money they have. What's most important for me is finding someone who's kind and caring."

Coming in on the heels of my quarrel in the bathroom with Mai as this was, I felt like her angelic smile bleached away all of my snappiness.

"Oh, but I think I'd also prefer someone more serious over someone who's sort of immature," she added.

"Oh yeah. You said you have two little brothers, right?"

"Uh-huh. They drive me crazy because they're total pains in the butt, but they are cute, I guess."

As if Ajisai-san wasn't cute herself. Heck, she was so petite, she reminded me of a fairy. Her signature look was curling her bangs to look like angel wings, and she always seemed sweet enough to brighten up a whole room, just like a bouquet of flowers. She was objectively the most sensible person in the group, and what with her sweet smile and universal kindness, she was one of those dream girls that everyone loved. That meant that if you got on her bad side, you were done for, kaput. Kind of scary, right?

"Ajisai-san, it's crazy how much better I feel when you're around," I told her. "Whoever dates you is going to be one lucky person."

"Aww! Thanks for the unexpected compliment. You put a smile on my face." In addition to the big, sunny grin, she also flashed me a pair of peace signs. She was just too cute. A literal angel. Maybe things wouldn't have been so bad if it was Ajisai-san who'd asked me out instead of Mai. But, no. Ajisai-san's angelic nature was for everyone to enjoy, so it wouldn't have been fair for me to keep her all to myself.

Ajisai-san and I were chatting about a popular show on TV (look, I know I have issues when it comes to communicating, but I can get by when it's a one-on-one conversation! Kind of!) when Mai, the classical beauty Satsuki-san, and the young and pretty Kaho-chan walked in,

bringing a huge ruckus with them.

“Hey, guess what?” Kaho-chan called. “Mai said she went to an exclusive swimming pool the other day. Isn’t that the coolest thing? Totally nuts, right? It sounds amazing! Pool time, pool time, pool time, baby!”

“Come now, Kaho, are you really that fond of swimming pools?” Satsuki-san asked. “Or are you just jealous of Mai?”

“Duh, of course I’m jealous! Aren’t you? Just think of the magnificent, warm pool water! The reclining chairs! The breathtaking sight of Mai sitting at the bar in her swimsuit!”

“I am less jealous and more simply peeved,” Satsuki-san admitted. “The whole thing is all too fitting for her.”

Sandwiched in between Kaho-chan and Satsuki-san, Mai beamed and asked, “Do you really think so?” She had the regal presence of a queen.

Oduka Mai, Sena Ajisai, Koto Satsuki, Koyanagi Kaho…and me, Amaori Renako. Us five made up Mai's friend group and glowed as brightly as the Cave of Crystals tucked away in a corner of the classroom. Sometimes this glow got way too overwhelming. Look, see. The guys and girls sitting near us kept sneaking glances our way. Of course, Mai, our leader, attracted attention, but all the rest stood out in the public eye too. Uh, well, I should say everyone except for me.

I think that merely being in the vicinity of those amazing people was enough to give me a little boost of happiness. I wasn't into girls or anything like Mai was, but hey—a cute girl's a cute girl, you feel me? And seeing cute girls makes you feel happy.

As I faded into the background of the group, Kaho-chan, always the life of this little five-person party, said, "Hey, guys! Let's go clothes shopping after school! I need to pick up some outfits for summer."

"I can't," said Satsuki-san. "I'm much too busy."

"Oh?" asked Ajisai-san. "With what?"

"Studying for exams."

Ajisai-san gave a little "ooh" of appreciation just as Kaho-chan made an "urgh!" face.

"Oh, come off it, Saa-chan," Kaho-chan whined. "You already look enough like a college student anyway, so you don't even need to study. You'll be fine! Now c'mon, come with me!"

"You're such a pain," Satsuki-san sighed.

"And you're so mean!"

Mai half closed her eyes and giggled at their antics. "You can try all you want," she said, "but you know that I'll score higher than you on the next test anyway."

"How dare you—Mai!" Satsuki-san shouted. A wave of murderous intent emanated from her. I could really sympathize.

"Shopping sounds like fun," said Ajisai-san. "I'd love to get some new dresses. What about you, Rena-chan?"

"Me? Oh, um. I mean, I…"

For a moment I froze, and then my hand shot up into the air in the most unnatural way possible. "O-o-o-of course I'd love to come along!" I yelled.

“Huh? Rena-chan, was your voice shaking just now?”

I waved both hands, feigning calm, and slapped a smile onto my face. “M-must have been your imagination!”

It was one of my own personal, unwritten laws to never turn down an invitation from anyone, even if that meant hanging out with the group after school and letting all my people juice run out, leaving me to crash partway through. I couldn’t show even a *hint* of how much I was opposed to hanging out, because I refused to repeat my past mistakes. My smile froze on my face.

“Well, I’d certainly love for us all to hang out,” Mai said, “but unfortunately…” Her implication that Satsuki-san had her studying to do was a totally natural way to cut Satsuki-san out of the group.

“Huh?” Satsuki-san cried. Looks like she’d really wanted to go after all if the rest of us were coming along, huh?

Just then, Mai glanced at me. *Hmm?*

“Unfortunately,” she continued, “I already have plans today. We’ll go shopping another time.”

Just like always, Mai made the decision without consulting us. But we were all used to it, so we took it in stride. I was the only one who noticed that Mai was sending me a lifeboat in a casual but powerful act of kindness. Her consideration came as a huge relief, but I also had mixed feelings about it. She was being kind to me because she had a crush on me, and that meant I shouldn’t let my guard down around her. But, nah, what if I thought of it as a friend bailing me out? Couldn’t I be happy then? Yeah, that was right. This was just normal friend stuff. Yup. It was all good. *Thanks, Mai! Worrying over.*

“You have a quiz tomorrow too, Kaho,” Mai pointed out. “You’d better go home and study. Good luck, Kaho and Satsuki. Even if you’ll never beat me, it’s still admirable that you always keep trying so hard.”

“Why am I even still friends with you?” Satsuki-san snapped.

“Hey now, calm down, guys,” Ajisai-san said, trying to mediate between them.

To an outsider, it looked like these two were pretty hostile with one another, but I knew that Mai and Satsuki-san had actually been friends since even before high school. They were close enough to compete with each other, after all. Well, maybe less emphasis on the

“each other” part. More like Satsuki-san’s one-sided attempts to go after Mai. It used to freak me out back when we first met, but now I just let it go. It was a same old, same old kind of thing at this point, you feel me?

“My goodness,” Satsuki-san sighed. “Oh well. There’s no point in arguing. You’ve always been like this.”

I figured she’d been waiting for Ajisai-san to step in before she backed down. Even as she refused to go along with Mai and her relentless stream of insults. Satsuki-san’s style dictated that she wait for just the right time to retreat.

Now that the familiar scene had fully played out, I giggled a bit awkwardly and said, “I guess it’s about time for us to go our separate ways, right?”

Even Kaho-chan, the first to suggest hanging out, grinned and said, “Okay, but next time for sure!”

It was kind of strange to me how no one ever seemed to mind when Mai decided things for us like that. We all just sort of shrugged it off and went “whatever.” I guess that was the power of charisma, huh?

Just then, Kaho-chan spoke up again. “Oh hey, that reminds me. What’s going on with Mai and Rena-chan lately? I mean, like, you two are really close all of a sudden.”

I squeaked. Oh no! Kaho-chan was way too perceptive, much to my considerable shock.

“N-no we’re not!” I stammered. “We’re just the same as we always were.”

“It hurts to hear you deny it like that,” Mai said.

“Oh. Um. Ah! I’m sorry!”

The moment I lowered my head to bow in apology, I caught a glimpse of Mai grinning at me. She was teasing me!

“See, that’s what I’m talking about!” said Kaho-chan. “That whole way you’re giving each other looks is kinda suggestive.”

S-suggestive?! I panicked, unsure of how I should respond to Kaho-chan’s allegation.

Then Satsuki-san promptly smacked Kaho-chan on the head. “Quit bothering Amaori. You’re just all biased when it comes to Mai.”

“I can’t help it,” Kaho-chan whined. “I’m a Mai fangirl! Look, see,

I even match with her." She pointed out her hair ribbon to prove it. I felt like I was looking at one of those girls who show up at idol autograph events every so often and are as cute as the idols themselves.

But when Satsuki-san saw that Kaho-chan's yellow ribbon was the same shade as Mai's hair, she bunched her eyebrows together in a frown.

"That egoist? She may be pretty, but that's all she has going for her."

"Huh? No way," said Ajisai-san. "Mai-chan's amazing. Don't you think?"

"See?" said Mai. "Ajisai understands me."

Honestly, I agreed more with Satsuki-san than with Mai and Ajisai-san, who were now smiling away at each other. Come to think of it, Satsuki-san must have been the only one in the group who knew what Mai was really like. That thought had never crossed my mind up until just then. Considering that I only knew one side of this little five-person group of friends, I was impressed.

Suddenly, someone hugged me from behind, jolting me out of my reverie with a yelp.

"But it's true," Mai said. Her breath tickled my ears and made all the little fine hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up. Why was she doing this in front of the others? *That's right!* Earlier, she had said that she didn't care if they saw!

I turned stiff as she enfolded me in her arms and laughed. "These days Renako is my fave."

Our resident princess's proclamation sent chills down my spine, made Ajisai-san laugh, and elicited a cold response from Sasaki-san.

Surprised, Kaho-chan rounded on Mai and yelled, "Why?!" She only earned Mai mussing up her hair for her troubles.

It was the same old scene for everyone else, but not for me. I clutched my chest, my breathing coming in wild gasps.

Then Kaho-chan pointed at me with a snap. "Rena-chan, your face is all red!"

Gah! Was it really? I surreptitiously glared daggers at Mai, who was still grinning. How come she liked me and not Satsuki-san? I wasn't

an angel who was kind to everyone like Ajisai-san or a cool fifteen-going-on-thirty-year-old like Satsuki-san. I wasn't even a lovable airhead like Kaho-chan. None of it made sense to me. Honestly, I wondered if all these popular girls were playing some kind of prank on me. Or maybe Mai just had something wrong with her.

"What is wrong with you?" I cried.

"What brought that on?"

"This whole situation, duh! When you claimed to already have plans, did you mean hanging out with me? But you never said a word to me about it beforehand!"

"Correct," Mai said. "Thanks for coming along with me."

She smiled at me cleverly, as if to prevent all further argument. I snarled at her gratitude with clenched fists.

Well, to be fair, I was the one who couldn't turn down an invitation in the first place. Besides, it made her happy, and I guess that made me happy too. I couldn't say anything now.

"A-anyway," I said, "didn't I say we should go to a café or something?"

"You did. And I decided to fulfill that desire in the best way possible," she said with a sip from her teacup.

She was, for some inexplicable reason, wearing a swimsuit. Well, maybe not inexplicable. She had a good reason to be wearing one, because we were sitting in the fitness pool of a crazy ritzy hotel in Akasaka.

"What is wrong with you?" I yelled again.

She had invited me out after school by informing me that the plans she'd mentioned were with me, and even as I thought it was kind of a foul trick to spring it on me like this, my mouth moved on its own and suggested we go to a café.

Compared to an outing with the rest of the group, an excursion with just the two of us alone wouldn't be so draining to my MP. But the fact that it *was* just the two of us was worrying in its own right. Plus, this was our first after-school date as (demo version, mind you) girlfriends. I wanted to get my feet wet with a not very date-y kind of

date, so I suggested we stop by a nearby café to keep it casual.

Then Mai went, “You want to go to a café? Oh, in that case I know just the place. I’ve actually been thinking that I’d love to take you there.” And, with a smile fit for a princess, she took me by the hand and pulled me away.

We held hands all the way to the train station and onto the train. Personally, I’d have been fine with staying closer to home and not making this a whole thing, but I figured that it’d be hard for local celeb Mai to relax at a place near school, where we’d be bound to run into other kids from Ashigaya. *Oh well, might as well go along with her*. After all, we were currently dating, right?

That was the plan, but then it turned out the place she brought me to was a huge, swanky hotel! I was so surprised that my feet stopped moving and Mai had to drag me inside. Her steps were so brisk and confident it was like she practically owned the place. She swiped a keycard in the elevator to bring us up to a floor of VIP suites.

Mai marched down a hallway that looked like the kind of thing you’d see in a movie, with a president flanked by a group of people in suits. Even in her uniform, she looked right at home there, but I felt like a total fish out of water.

Mai changed into a swimsuit she’d picked up at reception, then she and I (with me still in my uniform) came out to the poolside café to drink tea together. Which brought us back to the point where I asked her what was wrong with her.

“Looking back on what just happened, this still makes zero sense to me,” I sighed. The gorgeous madams who’d come for an evening dip at the indoor pool, all the company bigwigs, and even glamorous foreign tourists— “All the customers here are the same species as you, Mai.”

And don’t even get me started on the fact that the café had all these chairs and soft couches right next to the pool itself. It was incredible, even though I was pretty sure everything was going to get totally soaked.

“The rose hip tea here is just the thing to have after a swim,” Mai advised me.

I looked at the menu, but there weren’t prices listed anywhere.

“How much does it cost?” I asked her. “Don’t tell me it’s something absurd like 20,000 yen a cup.”

“Pool guests can partake of the refreshments free of charge. I registered a membership card for you when we came in, so feel free to come back anytime on your own.”

“You’re so extra you’re going to give me an ulcer!” I cried.

Up until then, I’d been trying to avoid looking at Mai, but sheer shock made me look up and get blasted in the face with the full sight of her in a swimsuit. Oh. My. God. She was wearing a deep red bikini. Everything about her was long and slender, and she didn’t have a gram of extra weight on her. Her proportions were so perfect it was as if her body obeyed her every whim. Honestly, when I saw her there in a swimsuit, she reminded me of one of those dolls I had when I was a little kid.

“You barely look Japanese,” I breathed. “No, scratch that, you barely look real. I almost think I’d feel better if you had pointed elf ears.”

Even as one part of my brain questioned why she felt the need to change clothes, the other part of me understood perfectly. If I had a body like hers, I’d have to change too. That swimsuit just looked way too good on her.

I took a sip of the rose hip tea she’d recommended and was blown away again. I’d gone into the experience thinking something like this would be too fine for a lowly commoner like me to enjoy, but it had a nice, refreshing taste that made it easy to swallow. If they sold it somewhere along my route home from school, I’d have bought tons of it. Well, on second thought, maybe not. It was bound to be crazy expensive!

“Why don’t you change, Renako?” Mai asked me.

I just about spat out my tea.

“They have hundreds of different swimsuits available for guests to borrow, free of charge,” Mai went on. “How about it? Would you like to take a little swim together?”

“I-I said I wanted to go to a café! Why on earth would I want to swim?”

“But isn’t a café in a pool even better than a regular café?”

“You’re just as extra as the people who come up with those weird cheeseburger curry dishes! Quit it!”

Yeah, I guess that a swimsuit really would have been more appropriate than a school uniform, given the location. But naturally, I was embarrassed. And besides, there was no way I was taking my clothes off when Mai was right in front of me in all her stunning swimsuit glory!

“Well, I suppose I wasn’t in much of a swimming mood to begin with either,” she admitted.

“Says the girl who already changed.”

“I mean that I’d need to put my hair up to get into the water, wouldn’t I?” she said. “And then I’d lose all my precious time with you on this date.”

“Ah, yeah, I guess that’s what the rules say.”

I got what she meant, then. It was a hard rule that we were lovers when her hair was down and friends when she had it tied up.

Mai lifted her pretty cup and smiled dreamily as she enjoyed the scent of the tea. “I’d like to enjoy this short time with you while I have it, you see,” she said. “It’s the only time I get to be alone with you.”

"…Well, yeah. I guess."

I could hear the water lapping around us as time slipped slowly by. I felt like I had wandered into another world far from the stormy seas of school, and honestly? It really wasn't so bad. Mai still looked so ethereal in that swimsuit that I could barely take my eyes off her, and when I took a sip of the rosehip tea, all my exhaustion and my struggles melted away. As much as I hated to admit it, I couldn't deny that the poolside was relaxing. I understood why Mai was so confident in taking me here.

As I wrapped both hands around my cup, I mumbled, "Um. Thanks, I guess."

"Hm? That was random. You're so cute, Renako."

"Sh-shut up," I grumbled, hiding my mouth with the teacup so she couldn't see my face. "I was just thinking, like, this actually isn't that bad, and I would never in a million years have been able to come here on my own. So I wanted to say thanks for bringing me along. That's all."

Mai giggled.

"You're doing an awful lot of laughing today," I pointed out.

"Well, if you're happy right now, doesn't that only work in my favor?" she said.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Still. Thanks. You have good taste, if nothing else."

Yeah, this whole thing really sucked, but why not do her a favor, be the bigger person, and acknowledge that I was having a good time, right?

I started zoning out as I gazed into the pool. It was enormous, and the water was so clear I could see down to the bottom. It looked like the whole thing would light up at night.

I wondered what would happen if I opened up to Mai even more. Could I get a swimsuit on too and go swimming with her? Despite myself, I found there was something really attractive about that idea.

"See you tomorrow," I said.

"Uh-huh. See you tomorrow. But are you sure you don't want me

to take you home? We're going in the same direction for part of the way, after all."

"I keep telling you, it's fine. This is far enough."

We stood in front of the ticket gate for Akasaka Station. Mai was calling for a car to bring her home and had offered me a lift, but I put my foot down at that level of pampering. She'd already spent money on me and done me a whole bunch of other favors.

"If you insist," she said. "Then I guess this is where we part ways."

Even with my nonexistent people skills, I could tell that Mai didn't really want to say goodbye. It was the first time I'd ever seen the school's supadari look so sad.

"Anyway," I said, "make sure you wear your hair up tomorrow. We've had enough of this dating stuff for now. Let's go back to friend mode."

"Sure, that's fair. I can never get enough of you, but all the same, you let me have a wonderful time today."

She patted me on the head in a relaxed, easy manner. Her hand was hot to the touch. We were standing in a corner so as not to block traffic, but I think people might have seen us anyway. Mai in particular tended to draw stares.

"Um, no, uh…" I began to explain.

Her graceful fingers traced the underside of my chin and danced across my throat like she was toying with a precious gem. I almost felt like she was making an attack on my vitals. Her face slowly crept closer to mine, trapping her prey in place. She was a natural hunter.

I thrust my hand up in the small gap between our faces and gave Mai a long look.

"Hey," I said, "I'm not some…hussy who you can kiss in the first week of dating."

Mai half closed her eyes and beamed at my desperate attempts to bluff. Then, in the next instant, she grabbed my wrist firmly and swooped in under my guard. I yelped as she descended on my poor, defenseless lips. Wait, wait, wait! Mai!

And then, mere centimeters before our lips touched, she stopped in place.

“Huh?” I spluttered.

“I don’t want to force you to do something you don’t want to,” she said. “I’ll have to content myself with this for today.”

Then she deposited a little peck on the end of my nose. I was frozen stiff at this point, but the sound of her lips brought me back to my senses.

What?! I jumped back and slapped my hands over my face to cover my mouth as fast as I could. What. The. Heck? She just! She just freaking kissed me! Those were her lips!

“You’re so cute, Renako,” she said.

No, okay. I wasn’t flipping out just because of a little kiss, especially when it was only on the nose. It was more like total shock—I thought I had just convinced her to back down, and then boom! She went and did that! This freaking girl!

“I am not,” I huffed. “Anyway! I’m not, but anyway!”

Being on the receiving end of Mai’s undivided affection made me feel like a duck afloat in a lazy river. Mai was just too strong, and I was losing all of my confidence to tell her no. The tip of my nose felt like it was on fire.

“Anyway! Next time, we’re going to be in friend mode, and I mean it! Because I’m going to show you exactly how good it can be!” I yelled in an effort to escape the feelings burning inside of me, scowling at Mai all the while.

She was *definitely* enjoying herself. “I can’t wait,” she said. “An opportunity for you to teach me about dating, is it? One where we’ll reap the benefits of being best friends.”

“We’re not going to be dating, for crying out loud! I mean, sure, best friends sometimes call hanging out going on dates, but that’s just a joke. Ugh, whatever! Girls are so hard to figure out.”

“And that’s why dating is a better option, don’t you think? Less hassle involved, less splitting hairs.”

“Oh, just shut up! We’re going to be friends. Friends, I tell you!”

Mai shrugged cheekily. At that point I just sounded like a spoiled brat. It was a total failure.

Mai giggled and said, “Okay, I guess I’ll be going now, Renako.

Thanks for today. I'm looking forward to seeing you again later."

"Yeah, yeah! My train's coming, so I'd better be going too. See you!"

"See you later… You know, I really do like you, Renako. Our next kiss will be on the lips." Then she tapped my nose with her finger and took her leave.

I stayed right where she'd left me, and there was no doubt in my mind that my face must have gone bright red. Oh my god! This girl! This freaking girl! I stamped my feet in frustration. She'd really got me good today, right up until the very end.

I figured that if I watched her make her gorgeous way all the way out of the station, it would have really seemed like I had a crush on her, so I turned on my heel neatly as the spin of an apple peeler and walked away. Good lord, was I exhausted. That final strategy of hers totally wiped me out. Being lovers really was hard to handle, what with all the bashfulness, embarrassment, self-consciousness, nervousness… That wasn't what I called fun at all.

"Just you wait, Mai," I muttered to myself. "You're about to have so much fun as my best friend that you won't know what hit you."

My will to fight rekindled itself there on the train platform. Nope, I wasn't going to let her have her way any longer! Mai way or the highway? Not on my watch!

The next day, Mai arrived at school with her hair in a tight ponytail, and I texted her an invite to come hang out. Once she got it, she turned to me with eyes shining so bright in expectation that it took every bit of willpower to not react.

But there wasn't anything wrong with that, of course. I mean, all I was doing was inviting my best friend over to my house after school!

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I was actually pretty amused to see the supadari look so obviously nervous.

"And so, this is my room," I said. "It's nothing fancy, just the room

of a plebeian, but make yourself at home."

This absurdly gorgeous girl poked her head around the doorframe and peeped into my room like a shy little kid. Well, that was certainly new.

"Thank you," she said. "Oh, wow. This is. You know. It's incredible. Yeah, it feels just like you here. Everything about this is so… Renako."

Her ridiculous babbling made me laugh. My room was nothing like all those rooms you see in magazines that practically scream femininity. My curtains and carpets were really standard-issue, and the pillowcases on my bed didn't have any patterns on them. Even my tissue box was right in plain view, no cutesy little cat cover on it or anything. My room was nice on the outside, but on the inside, it was just like me—dull and lame.

The two things that really stood out as different, very much not what you'd expect in a typical teenage girl's room, were the TV and the clunky game console sitting right next to it. A set of metal racks was home to a pile of game discs piled high enough to rival the collection of CDs an idol fan would've bought in hopes of winning a ticket to their favorite star's meet-and-greet.

I'd once heard someone say that showing off your room was like showing someone the inside of your brain, and I figured that meant that the human part of me was made up of video games.

Fidgeting, I made my second self-introduction in two months' time. "So…this is who I am. I'm Amaori Renako, and I really like games."

I figured Mai probably wouldn't be too turned off by this, but if she said something like, "You play games? Ugh, what are you, a preteen boy? How gross," I knew I'd cry.

However, Mai didn't seem repulsed at all. In fact, she looked over my whole room with interest. "Yes, I can tell," she said. "That's such a fitting hobby for you. I've never played video games before, but I think they sound interesting. Can I watch you play?"

My heart sang, hearing her take a natural interest in trying to understand me and my preferences. She was such a good person.

"S-sure," I stammered, "but if we're going to play, why don't we

try something two-player? I mean, you came over to have fun with me and all. Right?"

Still unsure of where she should sit, Mai hovered awkwardly over me until I plunked a cushion down. She sat down next to me, still looking lost.

"But like I said, I don't have any experience."

I handed her a controller, and when our fingers brushed against one another for an instant, my heart definitely didn't skip a beat or anything. It didn't, I swear. After all, we were being friends today.

"It's fine, it's fine," I consoled her. "This game is really simple, so you'll be able to pick it up in no time." Then I added, "And you don't have to be so stiff around me. We're friends, aren't we?" I beamed at her.

Her eyes darted around for a moment before she said, "Yes, that's true," and gave me a tiny nod. Her cheeks were ever so slightly pink.

Urgh. Mai was definitely acting different today. She was being way too meek and defenseless. With a face like hers, that only made her seem all the cuter.

I pushed the power button and forced myself to say, "O-okay, so this is a game where we both shoot zombies. To tell you the truth, I've always wanted to try playing this with someone else!"

"You haven't done so before?"

"Nope. This is the first time I've ever had a friend over after school, so… I've always felt like if I invited anyone over for some good ol' zombie shooting, they'd think it was weird for a teenage girl to be into it or something like that."

"Really, you think?" she asked. "I feel like anyone would take me up on that offer."

"That's because it's you, Mai," I explained. "Things are a little bit harder for me."

"Hmm. But I suppose that makes me your first. What an honor."

"Don't phrase it like that!"

I took the initiative, and we dove into the game.

Now that I'd dragged Mai into my territory, where our usual offense and defense roles were switched, she focused wholeheartedly on

the controller. I snuck a peek at her serious expression and felt warmth spread through my chest. Here she was. My friend. Playing a game together with me and chatting about my interests. This was a relationship that never got in the way of anything else, one with no strings attached. Ah, this was it. This was what I'd been searching for—this feeling of being at ease.

"Not there, Mai," I said. "Here, come this way. There's an ammo drop over here you can pick up. Oh, there's a zombie on your right!"

"Got it," she said. "Let me handle this area. Oh, I can still hear voices. Did we leave any behind?"

She was picking up the game really fast, which was a little bit annoying. But that was nothing compared to how happy I was, since I'd always wanted someone around to watch my back. As we sat in front of the TV laughing and squealing with one another, nothing like strategies and social cues or any of that nonsense could get in the way. *Ahh.* I knew that friendship was the better option. No other kind of relationship could trump it. Yeah, that pool experience was wonderful, but I mean…there really is no place like home, you know? Even if you could never show other people a couple of teenage girls blasting grotesque zombies to bits!

I turned to look at her to see how she was enjoying her first ever video game, but then I realized she was looking back at me the very same way. A little "whoa" slipped past my lips without any input from my brain. Her face was *very* close. Way, way closer than it was yesterday at the pool. She was so close I could feel the heat from her body.

I whipped away and yelled in an unnecessarily cheerful voice, "Okay, on to the next stage!" If I hadn't done that, I felt like I would have been swallowed up by something I didn't understand.

She, too, promptly faced forward. "Okay, sounds good."

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I was frozen, glued to my controller, feigning calm in the hope she wouldn't be able to see the roller coaster of emotions happening inside of me.

I erroneously believed that since I was having a ton of fun, Mai felt the same way and would soon decide that being best friends was the way to go after all. Which meant that what happened the next week was all my fault for letting my guard down!

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Next Monday was a hair down, girlfriend day. Mai messaged me to say that she thought the game we played the other day was really fun and asked if she could come over again to play some more. I felt torn. What would happen if I invited Mai over to my house in girlfriend mode?

I was incapable of saying no, so I automatically tapped out an "of course" and then flopped over the desk in defeat the moment the message was sent. I had given her the okay, but now I'd come down with a bad case of cold feet.

Ajisai-san noticed me grumbling all through lunch break and asked, "What's wrong, Rena-chan? It seems like something's been making you upset for a while now."

Her eyelashes were as soft as dandelion fluff above her clear, bright eyes, so it was all I could do to frantically mask my panic. "Nah, uh, nothing's wrong. I mean it's just that I've got some, like, stuff today I'm trying to figure out, you know?"

Well, that communicated absolutely nothing. I started over and tried again. "I have some studying to do today, but a friend offered to come hang out with me. So, I've been puzzling over that."

"If it were me, I'd hang out with her," Ajisai-san said with a sunny smile. "Studying can always wait until later, right?"

My frown vanished just as if I'd received a full-body massage. That's right, I thought. Why not? Why not hang out with her? Ajisai-san's words were as good as a divine revelation from an angel for me.

"Okay!" I said. "Yeah, then I guess I'll take her up on it."

"Cool," she said. "What're you guys gonna do?"

It was an innocent question, but I fell silent with the smile still frozen on my face. I wondered what would happen if I told Ajisai-san the truth, but I could picture it pretty well already.

"Oh yeah, we're gonna go get some guns and headshot zombies with them. You know how when you hit 'em just right their heads go like BLAM! and their brain matter flies everywhere? It's the best feeling

in the world!"

And then she'd look down on me with disgusted, joyless eyes, arms folded across her chest. "Ew," she'd spit in sharp, chilling tones. "That's gross."

Sure, it was only a ridiculous mental scenario, but just the thought of it almost brought me to tears. Ajisai-san was just so good at being a people person that I had to wonder whether she had some secret dark side hidden away deep inside. Was that messed up of me, maybe?

"Uh…we're going to go to my house and loaf around," I said instead.

It was a perfectly harmless answer, and of course Ajisai-san's eyes lit up. "Ooh, really?" she said. "Just chilling with a friend sounds like a ton of fun." She covered her hand with her mouth and giggled daintily.

Yeah. There was no way I could spatter this pure angel in blood.

Shortly after I'd kept my secret safe from Ajisai-san, Mai texted me back with a "Can't wait to see you later!" It was hard to believe she'd been so nervous about this same plan just a few days prior.

Anyway, this was nothing more than her coming over to my house, right? It'd be fine. Yeah. Besides, I was looking forward to playing a game with her again!

On girlfriend days, she and I left the classroom separately and only met up again once we were outside. Mai was really hung up on this rule for some reason. I didn't really get it, but I just kind of rolled with it, you know? Whatever floated her boat.

Anyway, we took the train and got off at the fourth stop to head to my house. Even though Mai was there with me, I wasn't as nervous as last time. Well, maybe I'd just gotten used to her. I mean, we'd spent the whole last week practically glued at the hip.

However, there was one slight accident. My mom arrived home from her part-time job at the same time as we pulled up, and we ended up bumping into her at the front door.

Oh crap, I thought, and I stopped in my tracks. I froze stiff as my mom looked at me (well, more so at Mai standing behind me) and turned rigid too.

“Uh. This is my friend,” I squeaked.

Mai immediately composed her face and bowed her head with the ultimate Little Miss Perfect impression. The whole transformation was almost as fast as Kaho-chan sprinting to copy a friend’s homework when she forgot hers at home.

“Delighted to meet you, ma’am,” Mai said. “My name is Oduka Mai. It’s been such a pleasure being Renako’s friend at school.”

I almost imagined I could smell the mellow scent of roses drifting around her. When the full force of Mai’s perfect, 5000 points introduction (a full 100 out of 100 plus 4900 points of extra credit for being so darn gorgeous) hit my poor plebeian mom, her eyes just about bugged out of her skull.

“Oh, uh…” she began, dazed. “Yes, thank you. I hope you will keep an eye out for Renako in your classes.”

Don’t volunteer me for that, thank you very much!

“Yes, but of course,” Mai said, looking like the supreme leader of the world vowing to bring peace to all mankind, so elegant and lofty was her smile. Meanwhile, her eyes prompted me that this was my cue.

Oh, right. I had been knocked so off balance by this random encounter that I’d forgotten what to do. I jumped in to say, “Oh, um, this is my friend Mai. She came over to hang out today. Actually, she came over last week too, but you were at work at the time.”

“I do apologize that I wasn’t able to introduce myself to you earlier,” Mai said.

“Oh, no, not at all. Think nothing of it,” my mother spluttered. “Hey, Renako, are you sure she’s really your friend? Not some princess attending your school in disguise?”

“Um. About that,” I said. Today Mai was wearing her hair down, so, strictly speaking, she *wasn’t* my friend!

Mai gave me a suggestive grin. “Renako-san and I have a very intimate relationship.”

Oh my god.

Naturally, my mother didn’t pick up on the euphemism, but she still looked confused, as if she wanted to point out that her own daughter really wasn’t worth Mai’s company. The back of my neck felt

like it was on fire.

I kicked off my shoes and scurried inside, feeling like I was fleeing a heater cranked up to the max. I wanted to get as far away from Mai as I could so that she wouldn't see the look on my face.

"Mai and I are going to go play video games now!" I called back to my mom. "So you don't need to come check on us or anything!"

Behind me, I could hear Mai's calm voice saying, "Thank you for having me over. Renako, I had no idea my mother-in-law was so charming."

Oh my god, don't try to slip a "mother-in-law" past me in the midst of all this confusion! I was mortified.

Sweat kept pouring down my back even after we made it to the safety of my room.

"What on earth were you thinking saying that to my mom?" I cried.

"What's wrong?" Mai asked. "We do indeed have an intimate relationship. As friends from school, right? Or did you think I meant something else by that?"

Her smile was like an impregnable fortress. I could feel the power balance between us shifting. Mai was acting *way* differently than she had a few days ago.

"I mean, yeah, I'm cool with that much, but like…" I said. "That wasn't why I invited you up to my room, you feel me? I just wanted to play a game with you, that's all."

"Of course. I'm just here to play games too. I really did have fun being your best friend, you know. I simply believe that I'll have even more fun doing the same thing, but as your girlfriend."

As if to show off, she flicked a long strand of hair. My brow furrowed automatically as her aphrodisiac perfume permeated my room. This was an enemy invasion in home territory, so I needed to keep my wits about me.

"Were you putting on a show a few days ago to make me let my guard down?" I asked her.

"Oh, no," she said. "I was just nervous."

“Then be nervous now too!”

“As much as I’d love to do whatever my girlfriend asks, I can’t simply get nervous on demand. I usually warm up to things after I try them once. Plus, now I’m motivated with girlfriend power.”

“Ah. Really, now?” There wasn’t anything else for me to say.

I took a seat a little farther away from her than where I’d sat the last time, feeling all the while like I was trapped in a cage with a dangerous carnivore.

Suddenly, Mai looked as if she’d been hit by a flash of inspiration. She crawled away on all fours over to my game console. Whatever Mai was up to had nothing to do with me, I told myself, and yet, as I watched her from behind, I couldn’t help but notice how *her* small behind swung to and fro in that skirt in a way that was really…hoo boy…

Wait, what the hell was I thinking?! She was a girl, I reminded myself!

Ignorant to the mental distress that was hitting me out of left field, Mai grabbed one of my games and turned back around to face me. “Want to try playing this?” she offered. “I think competing against each other would be more fitting for us today than playing a co-op game.”

She looked at me with such excitement that I had to fight back a wave of matching enthusiasm, although I couldn’t have told you where it came from. A seductive grin came over her face, and she licked her lips while leering at me. It almost felt like she was testing me. *Ugh, what a perv! Grrr!*

“Sounds fine by me,” I said. Even if we ended up being friends, I still needed to establish a track record of beating Mai. Hanging out in class and stuff was all well and good, but that’s not what being best friends was about. Best friends meant that we needed to trust one another completely, without any calculated self-interest from either side. It meant that we needed to stand on equal footing.

Also, I really wanted the bragging rights from beating her at least once!

“Yeah, sounds fine!” I repeated. “Let’s do this!”

Considering that Mai hadn’t even played the game before (not to mention touched a game at all until last week), I figured I was just

being more of a chicken than I should have. But hey, who could blame me? This was Mai we were talking about. Maybe she could find a way to outstrip my gaming prowess in a single week!

But a win was a win, even if it came from crushing a newbie!

The moment I felt motivated, Mai decided to up the ante. “Since you’re on board,” she said, “why don’t we make a bet so that the winner gets to ask their opponent to grant them one wish, no matter what it is? Lovers do that with one another all the time, don’t they?”

The words “No, there’s no fr—” were already on their way out of my mouth before I could think and bite back the rest of the sentence. Mai was just trying to psyche me out. Look, see? She was smirking at me. If I didn’t go along with her on this, I knew for *sure* that she’d only get more difficult to deal with later on down the road. She’d end up pulling out some other carefully prepared competition to challenge me with.

“S-sure, fine with me,” I said instead. “Now, let’s get busy.”

She giggled. “That’s the spirit, Renako. I knew I liked you for a reason.”

Scowling at her all the while, I fed the disc into the game console.

This game was a tough one. I stopped playing it since I hadn’t really been able to make much headway, but I’d still spent about a month running PvP matches in it over and over. Mai didn’t even know the controls. This was practically checkmate already.

“Let’s do first to five wins is the overall winner,” I said. “Want any time to practice?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Instead, how about we call it my win if I manage to beat you even once?”

“I’m not giving you a handicap,” I told her. “With your luck, I bet you could pull off a win by some complete fluke.”

“You have no sympathy,” she said. “But okay. Letting you have your way when you’re being all cute and selfish like that is another way for me to show my affection as your girlfriend.”

She beamed at me, full of confidence. I bet that me beating her wouldn’t even wipe that smile off her face. I figured she’d just smile and compliment me on my awesome gaming skills. Nevertheless, this was a battle that was impossible to lose. Let’s go, baby! Bring it on!

I won three rounds and lost five. What the actual hell?

"My win," Mai chirped.

What. The. Hell?! For a brief moment, I sat there in shock, utterly flabbergasted. Then I glared at Mai. "You said last time that you've never played video games before."

She stared back at me resolutely. "I don't lie to you, Renako."

"B-but, dude!"

Her smile never once faltered. I was sure she was telling the truth, because even if she'd lie to win this battle, she would have lost my trust as a whole. I knew full well that Mai would never want that. I knew all that rationally, but how? How could she have beaten me?!

I could almost hear her making a dainty little "tee-hee" sound as she gave me the most awful, self-satisfied smirk possible. "It's because I bought a game console of my own after I left your house the other day. Then I trained for days so I could surprise you. Did it work?"

"Too well!" I howled. "But what surprises me is that you're so freaking talented and persistent that you got *this good* in a single weekend!"

During the match itself, I'd entertained the sneaking suspicion that this was the case, but come on! Really? Losing to someone who'd practiced for only two days?

"I didn't have enough time to polish my blocking skills," she explained. "All I practiced were combos and making a strong offense. I figured that would be all I needed to beat you on my own. You play a bit too defensively, Renako."

"Damn you, Little Miss Perfect!" I roared. "You—you're so above the rest of us at school that you're bumping heads with the freaking Tokyo Skytree! Curse you!"

My pride as a gamer was shattered. I fell to the floor and began bashing it in defeat when the sight of Mai sitting with her legs folded up under her caught my eye. For a brief moment, I entertained the idea of biting her kneecap through her tights.

Then she decided to add further insult to injury. "Anyway, I win," she said. "Remember that I get to wish for anything I want now, right?"

Mai had no shame about cramming video game practice for two days straight, and now she announced this? She was totally gloating all over me.

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“Come on, Renako.”

“Yeah, yeah, we promised.” But the part that was really getting me was that “no matter what” clause. No matter what! “Just don’t ask me anything too weird, okay?! My mom’s downstairs, you know!”

Mai smiled innocently but took a moment to respond. “But of course. I know. I only asked for this so we could keep having fun together for as long as possible.”

“What was that pause about?!”

“I’m always willing to jump on a chance if one appears.”

I hesitated for a moment before asking, “If I didn’t stop you, what were you going to wish for?”

Mai looked slightly abashed.

Oh no. What now?

“Maybe, um. To be the mother of my children.”

“How?! You don’t even have a dick!” I cried.

I was Amaori Renako, sweet sixteen. A virgin. And never in my wildest dreams did I think I’d someday be yelling that.

“Also, wait,” I said, “were you seriously trying to use a bet to make a major life decision for me?”

“I wanted you to understand just how deep my affection for you goes.”

“You freaking liar! You were just hoping I’d give you a chance, weren’t you?”

“Well, how did hearing that make you feel? Did it make your heart skip a beat?”

“Afraid! The more I learn about what dwells in the depths of your depraved mind, the more frightened I get!”

I hugged myself and scooted away from her. There was no escape for me even in the sanctuary of my own room.

Mai cleared her throat and said, “At any rate, I was kidding. I would never make such an important decision with a bet, and I’d much rather you choose to be with me out of your own free will. Although, to be fair, that’ll happen no matter what.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I warned her.

I was starting to get fed up that I’d have to destroy that confidence of hers in order to win this thing and get to be my best friend, not my girlfriend.

“So, what’s your real wish?” I asked.

“Good question,” she said. “I have an infinite number of wishes.”

“Infinite, you say.”

“But if I had to choose one, it’d be this.” She pulled a rolled-up piece of calligraphy paper out of her bag. Why the heck did she even have that with her? She unrolled it with a confident flourish, wrote a sentence on it in her neat handwriting, and then held it up to show me.

I want to give Renako a squeeze.

She beamed at me in triumph, like she was flaunting a paper proclaiming her legal victory over me.

“That’s honestly so tame that it’s kinda fishy,” I told her.

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“Oh, really?” she said. “I guess it must not be enough to satisfy you. But don’t worry. I have plenty of other things prepared if you’d prefer something a bit friskier. For instance, I’d love to feel up your boo–”

“Nope, a hug’s good! Fine by me!”

Mai paused in the middle of pulling out another sheet of paper and lit up like a disco ball. “Really?” she said. “Okay. I’m happy to hear that. It can certainly be appealing to do things by force, but it really is best if your partner’s on board with it.”

“Uh…yeah, that’s best.”

I resigned myself to my fate. I mean, she’d kissed me on the nose a few days back, right? Besides, this was only a hug.

“Okay, open your arms,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” I mumbled. I didn’t care what happened next, so I opened my arms wide like a big ol’ scarecrow.

Mai came up to me with a serious expression on her face. Now, it was only because that face was so beautiful that my heart started thundering the moment she got close. That was only normal. I wasn’t the one to blame here. Plus, she had been messing around just a minute ago, but now she looked super serious. A self-aware beauty really was a dangerous thing.

“Here I come,” she said.

“Y-yeah, okay.”

Slowly, as if handling a fragile object, Mai wrapped her arms around me and pulled me into a hug. I’d never been hugged by anyone but my family members before, so this was truly foreign territory to me. I couldn’t describe it to you. It was this really weird feeling that made my whole body tense up, yet at the same time it was completely relaxing and satisfying.

“Renako,” she said.

I gasped. Her voice in my ear reminded me that someone was there. And not just anyone—Mai. Every minute and second of her existence was so valuable. A horrible guilty feeling crawled up my spine. I couldn’t hold a candle to her. What was I doing taking up all of her precious time?

“Renako,” she said, “I really like you.”

“Y-yeah, I get that already. You don’t need to keep repeating it,” I stammered.

In that moment, I was the only thing on Mai’s mind. She felt nothing but the heat of my body against hers.

“I really, really like you a lot,” she said. “I wish we could stay like this forever.”

“That’s, uh, kind of a long time, don’t you think?”

She only squeezed me harder, and I gulped. Our torsos were pressed so tightly together that I was afraid she could hear my heart pounding in my chest. My face turned an unnecessarily bright shade of red at the thought. No, there was nothing for me to feel guilty about, really. I was sure that my heart would be thumping just as loudly if anyone else hugged me with this same level of passion. Or maybe I was just adding another excuse to the pile.

At any rate, personality aside, Mai was incredibly beautiful. She was drop-dead gorgeous like you couldn’t believe to the point where it almost felt ridiculous for me to be jealous of her. And yet, here she was hugging me.

“H-hey, Mai,” I whispered in a hoarse little voice.

“What?” she asked. The tone of her voice made it sound like she was so, so happy to be here and hugging the girl that she liked. So maybe I didn’t need to ask after all.

But I did anyway. “Hey, Mai, uh…so do you, like…you know. Do you *actually* have feelings for me or something?”

She pushed away from me and looked directly into my eyes. Her pupils were so huge that she looked like a startled cat, or like someone who’d been blasted square in the face with a hose.

And she said—

“You’re asking me this *now*?!”

Turned out that my utter lack of self-awareness was shocking enough to knock even the supadari off-kilter.

Chapter 2:
There's No Freaking Way We'll Have Our First Kiss!

IT WAS BEFORE morning homeroom, the most depressing time of day. The start to another long daily grind. I stared off into space and mused about this whole situation.

See, the thing was, I always used to dream of being popular, or having people like me. But I'd spent my whole life as the most average Joe, and I had the feeling that nothing special was ever going to happen to me. So that's why I thought that any change would have to come from myself. On the flipside, I believed that no one was going to come along and bail me out. I was one of those dry, matter-of-fact kids you saw a lot of these days, not some romantic waiting around for my Cinderella story. Having friends wasn't something that just happened naturally; you really had to work at making them. If you managed to get a friend group or a clique, you'd better hold on to it for all that you were worth.

And so now, when someone had actually expressed interest in me, I simply couldn't wrap my head around the idea of it. To be honest, I still didn't fully believe Mai when she said that she lik—

"Come on, Rena-chan. It's too early to be this gloomy."

Whoa! The angel Ajisai-san!

"Oh, uh, yeah, I guess," I said. Considering the weird stress I was dealing with today, Ajisai-san's overwhelming cuteness was the last thing I needed at that moment. What if she was talking to me because she had a crush on me too? I could feel another misunderstanding rising out of the swampy quagmire, yanking at my ankle to drag me back in. *Blub, blub, blub,* down I went.

This was all Mai's fault, not mine. Okay, sure, maybe it was my mistake to invite Mai over to my house when she was in girlfriend mode, but still!

"Oh, wow, I guess it's true," Ajisai-san said. "Your hands are so cold. Have you ever heard people say that the tips of your fingers get cold when you're thinking about something bad?"

“Whoa!” I yelped. Ajisai-san had grabbed my hands when I’d zoned out yet again. Her hands were so warm around mine that the heat traveled all the way up from my fingers to my face. Was I right all along? *Did* Ajisai-san have a crush on me? No, no, no. I was way off the mark. Ajisai-san was just a super touchy-feely person in general. She even acted this way with the guys.

Honestly, I’d wanted to invite Ajisai-san to hang out with me somewhere for a really long time, but what always stopped me was the fear that she would say something like, “Oh, ew. Don’t get the wrong idea about me, okay? Loser.” But that’s fine, I reminded myself. It was fine… After all, Ajisai-san didn’t belong to just me…

“Oh,” she pointed out, “your hands are getting cold again.”

Then, just behind Ajisai-san’s confused face, who should I see walking into class but Mai. *Eek!* She saw me and Ajisai-san holding hands! I was the last person who could have told you why I was freaking out so much, but a sudden bad feeling came over me so quickly that I snatched my hands back and lurched upright.

“I’m! Going to the bathroom!” I cried.

“Huh? Okay, see you later.”

I passed Mai walking in with her hair tied up in a ponytail as I ran out of the classroom. My heart was pounding so loudly I was sure the whole class could hear it. “Calm down, calm down, calm down,” I muttered to myself, but my heart refused to follow instructions. Mai was dictating my whole school experience!

“Anyway, I was hoping we could get on the same page about something today,” I said. “Have a heart-to-heart.” We had stopped by a café after school and were now sitting across from one another at a table for two. In the midst of the din of all the kids chatting on their way home from school, the edges of Mai’s mouth quirked up into a smirk.

“Ooh,” she said. “How about a mouth-to-mouth for good measure?”

“No! We’re friends today, remember?”

I glared at her, but she just acted like she didn’t care, making a big show of winding a strand of her hair around her finger. Now that

she'd hugged me, she was acting like she had a big lead on me in the race. This freaking girl, I tell you.

I could feel eyes on us from all around the room, not to mention whispers of "Hey, isn't that Oduka Mai?" Mai was a local celebrity, a girl who had debuted as a model for well-known fashion magazines and on Instagram, and she was blatantly wearing her school uniform out in public, letting the whole world know which school she attended. I didn't mind the attention I got at school from being in her friend group, but I still wasn't used to random strangers staring rudely at us in public like this.

I could practically hear them whispering. "Who's that other chick with her?" "Mai's way out of her league." *Okay, and? What about it, huh? I'm Amaori Renako, that's who! A completely different person than I was in junior high, and I'm proud of that, thank you very much! And Mai even has a crush on me, so there!*

"What's wrong?" Mai asked me. "Why are you hiding your face behind your hands?"

"It's nothing," I said. "I just got too worked up and sold out my pride. Ugh, I'm mortified."

I couldn't believe I had just used the fact that Mai liked me, of all things, as something to be proud of, as a shield to protect myself with. But! It was just such a convenient excuse! Oh my god, was I an idiot?!

"Mai is my friend, Mai is my friend, Mai is my friend, Mai is my friend," I chanted to myself. "Okay, I'm better now!"

I felt like I was brute forcing this by insisting it over and over, but Mai only shrugged and took a sip from her cappuccino.

I moved my cup of milk tea to the edge of the table and brought out a notebook and my pencil box. I tore two sheets of paper from the notebook and placed one in front of each of us.

"I'd like to do a bit of housekeeping today," I said.

"In what sense?"

"Well, I'd like to actually know what it is you want to do with me as a lover."

"Which means that you're awfully interested in me," she gloated.

"Yes, actually, in a sense! The easiest way to find out would be to

slap you down on an autopsy table and take a look inside your head, but since that's not an option, we're going with this."

I glared at her reproachfully and passed her a mechanical pencil. "I'm going to make a list of the things I want us to do if we end up being friends, and you'll do one where we end up being lovers. Then we'll show each other."

"Interesting," she said. "I'm not complaining at all, but I'm definitely going to run out of space on this one sheet of paper."

"Then write down your top answers!" I paused for a moment. "Actually, I didn't think you'd agree to this. I thought you'd want to keep it as a surprise or something."

Mai put a hand to her mouth and giggled slightly. "I don't need to rely on surprises," she said. "Once I put my mind to making someone happy, there isn't a person in the world who couldn't be pleased with me. I'm sure that I'll end up delighting you."

Okay, bragging much?

"Someone's awfully confident," I said. "And yet you seemed pretty shocked the other day when you realized I didn't know you were serious about liking me."

"…Well, I'd better start figuring out what to write."

"Hey, don't act like you didn't hear me! Freaking Oduka Mai! World-famous Oduka Mai! Little Miss Perfect Oduka Mai acting like she can't hear me! Hey, are you listening?"

Mai fended off my yammering with nothing more than a smile. She was very used to the jealousy she garnered for standing on top of the world, so her tolerance for people griping about her was off the charts.

Okay, okay. Time to get to work. What did I want us to do as friends? Forget Mai, I was pretty sure *I* could easily fill up a whole page. I was forever adding newly released multiplayer games to my mental list of things I'd someday like to do with a friend, after all. Mai had put in a lot of effort into playing with me, so I was sure she'd enjoy those games too. There were lots of places I wanted to go with her as well. It was kinda hackneyed, sure, but I'd have loved to go down to Chiba with her and visit a certain mouse-themed amusement park. So long as we were together as friends, we'd be sure to have fun. Man, I was getting

more and more excited just thinking about it.

As I daydreamed away, so amped up I was even humming under my breath as I wrote, I realized all of a sudden that Mai was oddly silent. Curious, I stole a look at her.

Her face, so beautiful it could have rivaled a sculpture, was staring down at the page with a serious expression. My heart skipped a beat. She was really putting her heart and soul into thinking about me like this, and honestly? I couldn't lie. That felt really good.

Suddenly, I realized that I was genuinely curious. If we became lovers, what kind of things would she want to do with me? Did Mai have dramatic romantic daydreams about me, the kind like you'd see in the movies?

"Uh, hey, Mai," I said. "Mind if I take a quick peek at your page?"

"Oh?" she said. "Of course not. I don't mind."

She smiled at me as regally as a princess and then passed me the piece of paper like it was an invitation to a ball. For a moment, I felt all the noise of the busy coffee shop fade away, and in that instant, I felt like a lowly peasant before the princess who fell in love with her at first sight.

I looked down at the page.

Kiss you

Kiss you with tongue

Fondle your boobs

Get naked and cuddle

Get in the bath together

Wash your body

Wash your hair

Fondle your legs

Lick your thighs

Lightly bite your fingers

Touch you down there

Lick your ears

Let you lick my fingers

It was an impressive display of horniness.

“Excuse me?!” I cried.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “You don’t need to shout. Oh, wait. Did this turn you on?”

“No! Stop! Quit blushing!”

I wrestled with the mighty urge to tear that sheet of binder paper to shreds and chuck all of them in the trash.

“Anyway, Mai…” I hesitated. “Does this mean that right from the start you’ve only been after me for my body?”

Mai smiled at me indulgently, like she was a preschool teacher smiling at a toddler who’d just told her they loved her.

“What’s that look supposed to mean?” I cried.

“Renako, if we’re talking objective facts without any of my personal feelings involved, you’re not someone anyone would go after for their body.”

I heard a massive splattering sound from somewhere around my chest. That was the sound of my heart getting stabbed. “Wh-wh-what do you mean?!” I spluttered. “Listen, I wear an F cup, okay?! An F cup!”

How dare she point that out so damn calmly! Of course I was mortified! Who wouldn’t be? Of all the outrageous things!

As I yanked out each of the word-knives she’d stabbed me with, Mai crossed her legs and began playing with hair. Calmly, she said, “I want to be intimate with my lover, in both a physical and emotional sense. Is that really so odd?”

She sounded defensive, but considering her usual habit of trying to smooth-talk me, I couldn’t help but think she was being serious.

“I’m just surprised that that’s the only thing you were writing,” I said. “And I mean…well, you know.”

I lowered my voice, and when Mai came closer to make up for that, I averted my eyes. “You know, it’s just that I thought you dating another girl was kind of like, you know, not as serious as being with a guy.”

“…Oh,” she said.

It sounded horrible even to my own ears, but when the great

Oduka Mai fell in love with a commoner like me, what else was I supposed to think? So that's why I said it, and really meant it, in the one way I could express it.

"Mai, you're crazy popular, so it just felt like you were going out with a girl because you're tired of guys," I explained.

"I'm saddened that you didn't believe me, but I am aware that I live an exciting lifestyle that is very different from that of most teenage girls." Mai smiled bitterly.

"Yeah. So, it was like, when you hugged me… You know, that was the first time it actually sunk in. I realized that you actually did like me, and it really shook me up. Like, wait, what is she thinking? That kind of thing. All of a sudden, I felt like I didn't know who you really were or where you were coming from."

"I see," she said. "And that's why you suggested this activity."

Mai was lost in thought for a while before she stuck out her hand with its perfectly manicured nails.

"Huh?" I said. "Are we shaking hands?"

"Give me your hand."

I took a quick look around us and then shakily extended my hand across the tabletop. Mai took my palm within her hands and squeezed it. Hers felt slightly cool in a way that was pleasant, but that must have been because my hands were so warm. It was a completely different sensation than when Ajisai-san held my hand. For some reason, I felt like more than our hands were connected. It was almost like there was a link going all the way to our hearts.

She smiled at me brilliantly and touched her free hand to her chest. "I want to touch the girl I love," she said. "To me, sensual touch is a part of being lovers, regardless of whether they are male or female. I am always mentally prepared for anything that you'll do with me."

Thank God there was a wall right behind me, because if I'd been sitting closer to the aisle, I might have keeled right over.

"But two girls normally can't do those kinds of things!" I protested.

"If you want to know how it works, I have no problem with spending a night with you and giving you a lesson. You'll have my undivided attention."

“Speak for yourself, but I’m not mentally prepared for that!”

I shoved Mai’s list into her face and then hurriedly reiterated, “Anyway, this isn’t what best friends do!”

“Your hands are sweating,” she pointed out.

“It’s the cold sweat of dismay! Because I’m a piglet who’s only just found out that the girl right in front of me is a wolf! Who’s looking to eat me up!”

I shook off Mai’s hand. I was terrified that if she held it any longer, and got even more of her Mai-ness on me, at any minute I might find myself going along with her suggestions.

“Jeez,” I muttered. “Mai, you’re freaky aggressive in relationships.” I held my tongue before I ended up asking her how she’d ended up that way. Come to think of it, Mai was the most outgoing girl I’d ever known, and a three-quarters Japanese model to boot. No wonder she always had sex on the mind (okay, yes, this was a stereotype).

“Oh!” I cried. “I know! Do you have any plans this weekend? If you don’t, then I want to hang out! Let’s go somewhere. Not for a steamy date or anything, but as friends, got it?!”

As I prattled on, Mai looked at me with amusement. “If you ask, how could I refuse?”

There it was. That smug “I’ll let you try to save face because that won’t change the fact that I’m going to win” grin. Gah! This girl really had a way of yanking my chain!

“I-I’m not talking about doing, y-you know, but I’m going to show you how awesome it is when best friends can go hang out and don’t have to hold back around each other!” I said.

To be honest, I felt driven into a corner. I was vaguely aware of the reason why, but I put on this show of bravado because there was no way in hell I wanted Mai to find out. This girl was trouble. I had to find some way, somehow, to do something about her! At this rate, her worldview was going to rub off on me and I’d be doomed to turn into one of those obnoxious party girls obsessed with getting laid…!

After I left the café, I immediately said goodbye to Mai and scurried home. I grabbed my list of places I wanted to go and things I

wanted to try from off its shelf and added the best ones to my sheet of binder paper. I was not about to admit that Mai was slowly but surely reeling me in. I'd decide it with the next outing. This wasn't just reeling me in—she was dragging me into a trap. But with my attack, I'd skewer her right through the heart.

In order to pull that off, I spent the next four days of lunch break casually watching Mai, in order to research her likes and dislikes. Then I built the perfect plan to target her.

I didn't want the kind of relationship that came with dating another girl—that had to be handled as delicately as a bomb. Instead, my heart ached for us to be perfect best friends for the next three years—two girls who could maintain appropriate boundaries and yet support each other when the going got rough.

Alas, in spite of my determination, the weather forecast for the weekend promised a huge storm. If it got to be too bad, I'd have to cancel our plans altogether. Damn that girl! Even the weather was on Mai's side!

***

It was the middle of June now, and we had half a month left in our competition. I snickered in the bright June sunshine. Now everything was going my way, even the weather. *Bwa ha ha! I won!* (I might have been celebrating a bit prematurely.)

Mai and I had agreed to meet up at the Tokyo Teleport Station, which was about a twenty-minute ride on the Rinkai Line from Shinjuku. Normally. I'd stay closer to home, or, if I really wanted to take a hike, I wouldn't go much further than Shinjuku, but today I was feeling much more enthusiastic. This was a crusade to determine how I'd spend my next three years of high school!

I stood before the ticket gate in the midst of a confusion of families and couples coming and going, wearing an outfit that was pretty fashionable but not too show off-y. Besides a simple top, I had on a casual knee-length skirt in a sort of dark shade. Since I'd be walking next to the substantially taller Mai, I'd chosen a pair of sandals with

thick soles. Back when I first decided to turn over a new leaf for high school (and it pains me to mention this), my sister picked an entire new wardrobe out for me, so I knew my fashion sense was spot-on now.

Exactly five minutes before one o'clock, our agreed-upon meetup time, a tall, gorgeous celebrity materialized from out of the crowd. There she was.

Oh, huh. Mai was wearing totally normal clothes: a white blouse and a flared skirt with a long hem. She was even wearing sneakers. It felt odd, like she wasn't putting a ton of effort into this. Of course, everything she was wearing was still perfectly fashionable for going out on a weekend, and she had even done up her hair all fancy. Even so, everything had this perfect best friend feel to it.

"Hello, Renako," she said. "June is going by so quickly, so I'm glad we chose the perfect time to do this."

"You're telling me," I said. "I'm so glad it's not raining! Hey, Mai, are you one of those girls who brings sunny weather wherever she goes?"

"Oh, not at all," she said. "It only rains when I want it to. It's always clear when that's what I'd prefer."

"Some people have all the luck. I bet it'll catch up to you someday."

We set off, Mai walking along by my side. She didn't try offering to hold my bag or anything, either. There was a sense of appropriate boundaries between us, and let me tell you, that was a relief.

“Anyway, thanks for coming all the way out here today!” I said. “I made us a special schedule, so we’re going to have a blast.”

We rode a long escalator up to street level. The breeze blew in strong from the nearby ocean as the sun beat down on us. I always loved the unusual, artificial feel of this townscape on this man-made island in the bay.

“Mai, you said don’t come to Odaiba to hang out all that often, right?” I asked. “I’m honestly kinda surprised that you don’t seem to do all that much in your free time.”

“Well, I’ve never had any friends who’d go out with me alone on weekends and such.”

“Huh, really? But you’re always literally covered in people.”

“Sure, but the people I talk to at school or at work aren’t exactly the same people I’d want to share my personal time with. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Like your positions are too different for that? I kinda get it.”

It was a little nutty to me, because even I had never imagined I’d be going places with her and hanging out like this. Wait a sec. Now I felt like I was hogging Mai all to myself.

“What’re you grinning about, Renako?” she asked me.

“Huh? Oh, uh, nothing.”

“Are you happy that we’re hanging out together?”

“Maybe!” I answered with a cheerful grin.

For some unknown reason, Mai blushed. It took her a moment to respond. “O-oh, I see. Well, I’m very happy to hear that.”

The two of us continued to chat about nothing of any sort of importance as we walked, and shortly we arrived at one of Odaiba’s huge attractions, Odaiba Plaza. The place was filled with tons of awesome things: a shopping mall, a whole amusement park, and even a resort hotel right next door. A giant, life-sized robot was enshrined at the entrance, and I’d heard people say that its eyes would light up and it’d start moving if danger ever threatened Odaiba.

Man, now I was excited! But as we were walking into this tourist’s paradise, I commented to Mai, “Hey, people keep turning to stare at you.”

“That’s true,” she said. “People often come up to speak to me when I’m alone, you see. It’s such a hassle that I rarely go anywhere where there’s crowds.”

“That’s the price you pay for beauty, I guess,” I said. “Hey, Mai, what’re your thoughts on your own appearance?”

“Like a fast walker or a person with a sturdy build, I think my body is my weapon, and a pretty good one at that.”

“If it’s a weapon,” I said, “then it’s about as effective as setting someone loose with a Gatling gun back in prehistory.”

Mai lifted one eyebrow, amused, and peered at me closely. “Oh? Do you like the way I look?” She chuckled to herself. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Those sudden bursts of laughter always made my heart skip a beat, so I wished she’d knock it off.

“Oh, uh,” I stammered. “It’s just like…you know, with looks like yours, I’m pretty sure everyone thinks you’re hot.”

“It’s true that I get a lot of compliments. But compliments from strangers don’t make me feel as good as ones from the girl I like. That’s because you’re my hero of destiny, the one who freed me from my cage of isolation.”

“Okay, quit exaggerating,” I scoffed. “I’m sure destiny has plenty of nice people lined up for you, so be patient!”

Just then, someone called out to Mai: “Hey, cuties, you got a sec?”

It was a couple of guys who looked to be around college age; they were probably hoping to get lucky and win Mai’s phone number.

Mai seemed like she was about to churn out some basic response like “No, sorry, I’m here to spend time with my friend,” so I grabbed her by the arm and tugged her away. For a crabby introvert like me, brushing people off was child’s play.

Once we were a safe distance away from the guys, I reprimanded her. “Mai, if you respond to everyone who tries to come and talk to you, they’ll never stop.”

She looked apologetic. “But I have to be careful because of the media.”

Oh, that made sense. She needed to put herself out there for the

fans, which I guess meant she couldn't just ignore everyone all across the board. Okay, fine!

"In that case, I'll protect you today!" I swore, aiming a pompous grin at my friend.

Mai's eyes opened wide in shock. "You'll protect me?" she repeated, slowly.

"Yeah, 'cause we're friends, right? You can count on me!"

I thumped myself on the chest. I mean, if she was on edge the whole day, that meant she couldn't enjoy our hangout from start to finish, right? And believe me, that was the last thing I wanted!

Mai stared at me intently as I played the big guy in front of her. Wait, did she not trust me?

"Don't worry!" I insisted. "I can do anything when I put my mind to it… I mean, I probably can!"

"Oh, no, I wasn't thinking that," she said. "Never mind. I suppose I'll see what it's like to be the damsel in distress under your protection, yes?"

"Don't give me that damsel crud," I said. "You're my friend, okay?"

Jeez, how many times did I need to repeat myself to get it through her thick skull?

We strolled through the air-conditioned plaza. Our destination? Obvious. I chuckled internally. I supposed it was about time I let my dear friend in on the secret, hmm?

"Say, Mai," I began. "Let's go do a VR experience today."

"VR?" she said. "Oh, that's virtual reality, right? I've heard that those kinds of games are pretty popular these days."

She was trying to look like she didn't actually care. Even the look in her eyes was cold and uninterested.

"That means you haven't played any yet, right? I did a demo of one at a game show one time, and it was pretty awesome. I bet you'll love it too."

Mai giggled as we walked down the streets of this shopping mall

that looked like it should have been built sometime in the not-too-distant future. When she laughed, yet more people turned to ogle her.

"Go ahead and laugh while you can," I told her, "because you're going to come apologizing to me in tears in just a few minutes."

"No matter how amazing virtual reality is, why would I need to come apologize to you?" she asked. "But if you insist, then I suppose I'll have high hopes for it."

"You'd better!"

"I was always one of those kids who was raised on opera performances and live concerts," she said. "So let me just say that I have a pretty discerning eye for all things entertainment."

The signs that she was in for a sound defeat kept on popping up, one after the other. *Good. Let's keep it that way.*

The VR area was smack dab in the center of Odaiba Plaza and required a reservation to get in. Once you forked over the cash and got inside, you used tickets to play with whatever attractions fit your liking. It was a pretty hefty price for students like us to pay, though. I think most people would have been like "I'd love to join you, but that's kind of expensive to do with a lot of people, so I'm really torn." But this was Mai we were talking about, so I didn't even need to check that it was fine with her. That made things way too fun.

We arrived perfectly on time and made our way in without any trouble. After stowing our bags in the lockers, we walked around to look at the various VR attractions. The place was about the size of a gym and dotted with various cool-looking booths. It was almost like a game world itself.

"See anything you want to try?" I asked.

"Hmm," she said. "I'm not sure. I'll let you choose."

"Okay! In that case…let's hit the slopes!"

To start us off, I chose a game that involved snowboarding down a snowy mountain. We gave the lady at the reception two of our tickets, and she gave us an explanation of the game along with a set of paper masks that covered everything but our eyes, like a pair of masquerade masks. We put on our goggles and switched them on.

I found myself on a full 360-degree sprawling panorama of a snowy mountain. The steep slope in front of me looked so realistic that I

would have been totally freaked out if I were afraid of heights. It looked like the resolution had gotten loads better since I'd last played a VR game, and my heart thundered in my chest. Behold the progress of video game technology!

"Oh my," Mai said, her voice full of admiration. "This is really something." I looked over and, instead of seeing Mai in her streetwear, found her avatar all kitted out in a ski suit.

And with that, we were ready! "Let's go, Mai!" I said. "Think you can keep up with me?"

"Yeah!" Caught up in my enthusiasm, Mai pushed off from the ground with great force and slid away with me.

Slicing through the wind, she and I flew down the slope of this unmarked snowy landscape. It felt absolutely amazing. I wasn't just an ordinary teenage girl anymore—now I was a lone adventurer traversing this icy peak. That is, until I crashed headlong into a projecting boulder and flipped through the air, much to Mai's amusement. I could hear her laughing next to me.

"Wow," she said. "That was actually pretty awesome."

"It was! Even though I have no idea how you ended up getting a better time than me."

We weren't exactly competing with each other, so I wasn't salty about losing, but, hey, it's just a fact of life that I'd have been happier had I won.

Mai and I naturally gravitated towards the games where we could square off against each other as we roamed around the VR area. We piloted robots and brawled against one another. We became pro baseball players and competed in batting and pitching in front of a full crowd. We fought to see who could rack up the higher score shooting outer space invaders with ray guns. We even occasionally teamed up to escape from haunted mansions or become sword-swinging, monster hacking-and-slashing heroes of legend. Mai was so into it she started roleplaying, yelling, "Come fight me, you fiends! You'll never take this village while I still stand!"

We sought out one source of excitement after another, dashing around the VR zone from one place to the next.

“Oh, hey, that one over there opened up!” I called. “We only get to be here for two hours, so they’re gonna kick us out in twenty more minutes. C’mon, Mai, hurry up!”

She giggled. “You don’t have to tell me twice. But I have to say, I think you’ve been awfully mean, Renako. You knew this wonderful place existed, and yet you kept it a secret. Why didn’t you invite me to come hang out here sooner?”

“Well, I invited you today, didn’t I? Maybe you just need to make yourself more invite-able!”

Even as we argued, we never once stopped grinning at each other.

“I’m pooped,” I whined.

“My cheeks hurt from smiling too much,” Mai groaned.

We slumped over a table in one of the plaza’s cafés. We’d had a blast, sure, but there’s such a thing as having too much fun. I’d gotten so worked up that I lost my ability to hit the brakes, and now I felt like a runaway train that’d crashed into the train station.

“Ah,” I sighed. “The sourness of this grapefruit juice is stinging my mouth.”

“To tell you the truth,” Mai said, “at first, I didn’t understand why we needed to come all the way out to Odaiba just to have fun. But I had such a good time.”

“So that’s what you thought, huh?”

I pushed myself upright and lazily looked at Mai. You know how sometimes you stretch a shirt’s neckline so much it can never go back to normal? That’s how wide Mai’s smile was stretched in that moment.

“Even if I bought a VR console for my house, I suppose we wouldn’t be able to recapture this same fun experience,” Mai said. “There’s a certain kind of fun from having some lack of freedom, a predetermined amount of time to spend with a friend.”

“Y-yeah, that’s right! That’s exactly it!” I jabbed my finger at her without thinking. “That’s the important part. You understand me now, don’t you, Mai?”

Mai ignored me and went on. “But in that case, wouldn’t it be just as well to be girlfriends and not best friends?”

“Nope! You don’t understand me at all!”

I flopped back in my chair dramatically, making Mai’s shoulders twitch a bit. “See, when you’re out on a date, you always have to be on your guard, right?” I explained. “You spend the whole time worrying about all kinds of crap, like hoping that your partner’s going to think you look good, that you won’t do anything to weird them out, and that they’ll end up liking you more at the end of it.”

Mai rubbed her chin and said with great feeling, “I see now. So those are the things you worry about when we go on dates?”

“No! It was a purely hypothetical example!”

“Hypothetical? I’ll say. You’ve never dated anyone.”

I pretended not to hear that last remark. “That’s why being best friends is optimal. Like, today, you weren’t forcing yourself to have a good time, were you? I feel like we couldn’t have acted like this if we were dating.”

Mai accepted that seriously enough. She nodded. “Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

Good, good, I thought. I knew that Mai was enjoying herself, and even I was having a ton of fun. In spite of how quickly social situations drained my batteries, my energy meter still had quite a bit left in it, so I felt like I could hang out with her just about all night, even.

“Hey, Mai,” I said. “After this little break, let’s go shopping. I’ve got a couple things I’d like to check out.”

“…Sure,” she said and nodded.

I took her hand and stood up. “Let’s go!”

Linked together as we were, Mai put up no resistance, but I could tell that there was still something on her mind. “I see now,” she murmured. “This is what you mean by being friends.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Oh, no, never mind.”

Once we left the café, I let go of her hand (we couldn’t keep holding hands the whole way, duh. We were friends, after all!) and came to a halt.

“C’mon, what is it?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

As I peered at her, Mai smiled and shrugged it off.

"It's nothing, really. I was just thinking that you were right. Maybe we really do need to get on the same page. Different people can use the same word to mean totally different things, you know."

I didn't get what she was driving at. "…Are you just messing with me again?"

"Of course not. You attach quite a lot of value to the word 'friend,' and I was thinking that I should make it clear to you that I do the same for 'girlfriend.' That's what you've shown me with all of your great effort up to this point. Next time, I need to make sure I return the favor."

I frowned at her declaration. This sounded an awful lot like, "Oh, you haven't seen anything yet!"

"Knock yourself out," I said, "but, seriously, don't do anything like rent out all of Disneyland just for me, okay?"

"Oh, don't you think that's romantic?" she asked.

"Having different financial opinions is the number one reason for a breakup!"

We spent the whole day in Odaiba Plaza. I didn't know what was preoccupying Mai, but we still had a really good time. We walked around and looked at shops for a bit, then we stopped by at the café again to chat. Time just flew by.

Neither of us was eager to leave, but when we stepped out of the plaza to go catch the train back, we got stranded where we were thanks to a huge freaking six o'clock downpour. What the?! Wasn't it clear skies earlier today?

"You son of a—!" I swore. "Weather, I thought you were supposed to be on my side!"

Now dripping wet in the rain, I pretended to sob by the entrance to the plaza as Mai diligently dabbed at me with her handkerchief. It all happened the moment we left the plaza. The sky opened up and a deluge of water, like a torrential cloudburst, came pouring down so quickly that in just a few seconds I was soaked from head to toe. I was

as wet as if I'd jumped into a swimming pool with all my clothes still on.

"Why'd it have to come down now, of all times?" I complained.

Around us, lots of other teens who'd also been caught in the downpour were whining loudly about the rain, how cold it was, and how this all freaking sucked.

My bangs were plastered to my forehead and dripping. Mai tried to mop it up, acting like a mom, and I pulled away in embarrassment.

"I'm okay," I told her. "You dry yourself off."

"I could try," she said, "but our handkerchiefs might as well be a drop in the bucket."

"Good point. We can't take the train in this state. What're we supposed to do? I guess maybe we could buy a towel and a change of clothes somewhere in the plaza…?"

Then Mai made a tiny little sneeze that sounded like *Achoo!* The June rain was pretty chilly, and when I tentatively touched Mai's upper arm, she felt as cold as an ice pop. Oh, shit.

"H-hey, Mai," I stammered, "we really need to get you dried off." Then, with a gasp, I realized something else. Now this was *really* an attention-getter! "Because I can see it! You know, *it*!"

Mai was already beautiful like nobody's business, and now she was drenched from top to bottom. Her clothes were so wet you could see through them right down to her underwear. She looked so unbelievably hot even I had to gulp.

I had to do something to protect my best friend. For now, I'd be a wall to guard her!

Mai made a face like she was trapped in all the water, then she put her hand to her mouth as she pulled out her phone.

"I'm getting a little chilly," she said. "Sorry, do you mind if I make a quick call?"

"Huh? No, go for it."

She wiped off the wet outer case of the phone with her handkerchief and then began calling someone. I wondered if maybe she was asking for a ride back, but then she said, "Yes, it's me. I got a little bit wet, Maman."

Seemed like Mai was the type to call her mom Maman. Fitting, right?

However, even if her mom was going to come pick her up, I couldn't leave Mai standing around half-drowned to wait for her. I didn't really care if I myself caught a cold, but I didn't want to be like freaking Typhoid Mary over here and pass it on to her. I had to come up with a way for us to dry out; I went over to the mall directory for ideas just as Mai hung up.

"Could I ask for a little more of your time, Renako?" she asked. I had only taken my eyes off of her for a moment, but when I looked back, I realized all over again that the water dripping from her wet hair made her look as pretty as a mermaid from a fairy tale.

It took me a second to reorient myself. "Huh? Uh, sure," I said. "I don't mind, but where do you want to go?"

Mai faltered as if she were embarrassed. I figured she was going to say she was leaving me here and going home on her own or something. Eh, whatever. Mai had that whole rich kid thing going on, and besides, look at this mess we'd ended up in. So it wasn't like there was anything I could do about it, right?

But I was wrong. Looking at me with the eyes of a puppy left out in the rain, she pointed to the hotel on the directory and said, "I want to take you to a hotel room."

Yup. That's exactly what my *close friend* Oduka Mai said to me.

For a moment, I was so speechless I just went, “Wha…?” And then she explained herself, and I realized that there was nothing to do but to go along with her.

Mai had plans to go overseas the next week and help out at her mother’s job, which naturally meant she couldn’t risk ruining her health before then. She needed to warm up before she went home. So, after talking to her mom, she’d arrived at the conclusion that she should check into a hotel. Booking a hotel room just to change clothes and shower was one hell of a way to spend money, I thought, but whatever. Too late now.

Okay, no, hold up. Time out. “And why does all that mean I have to come with?” I asked.

“Well, if I said I was going to go take it easy in a hotel room and left my dripping wet best friend to find her own way home, that’d be pretty messed up of me, don’t you think?”

“Well, when you put it that way, I guess so.”

But still, it’d be just me and Mai. The two of us, in a conveniently free hotel room. Okay, when she put it that way, sure, but being with *Mai*… Yeah, no. Mai was my friend right now. We were best friends, so I’d be fine, right? I’d be fine, right? Oh my god, I didn’t even know anymore.

It was a resort hotel, one of those kinds where there’s a big honking bed right smack-dab in the middle of the room. The tub was gigantic enough to fit a whole family in it. While Mai ran the hot water, I shot my mom a text that said, “I’m taking shelter from the rain right now, so I’ll be home a little late.” Well, I mean, that wasn’t wrong. …I just didn’t tell her that the shelter happened to be a hotel room.

Mai came back into the room with a bath towel around her neck. “Here, Renako, you get undressed too.”

She was already down to her underwear and urging me to do the same. *The* Oduka Mai was half-naked. I’d seen her in a swimsuit not long ago, but the view of her in nothing but an expensive-looking black bra and undies was a whole other story. Her wet underwear was ever so slightly see-through and…dare I say, kinda sexy? *Oh no. We’re friends right now, friends, friends, friends.* I chanted this to myself like a sutra.

Okay, but for real, before we even factored the whole best friends or lovers thing into the equation, getting naked in front of this girl was

a huuuge challenge for me, as a fellow girl.

"Come on, Renako, hurry up," she said. "Because I already called room service to come up and dry our clothes for us. Look, your face is getting redder by the moment."

Yeah, but that's not because I'm cold, Mai…

"Don't rush me," I said. "I'm already doing my best to work up the courage." Unable to delay giving in any longer, I resigned myself to my fate. Mai was on the verge of stripping *me* naked if I kept dragging my feet, and that would have been a disaster on so many levels. Like the view she'd be treated to, for instance.

I peeled off my clothes, so wet they were sticking to my skin. Yet even when I got down to my underwear, Mai kept giving me that same urging look.

"What now?" I asked. "I took my clothes off like you asked."

"Nope," she said. "Take off the cute pink undies too."

"What?! Oh, come on! They're only the cheapo kind! They were 2,000 yen for the whole set!"

"No one asked about the price. Now come on, take them off. You'll catch a cold."

Mai always had this certain look in her eye, the one that said, "Of course I'm always right," whenever she started acting like queen of the class. I, ever the timid introvert at heart, quailed under that glare. And she did have a good point!

I gulped and then yelped, "I'm going to the bathroom!"

Once in the next room, I slipped off my underwear and shoved it into the laundry bag. Then I pulled on a bathrobe before returning to the other room only to find that Mai had also changed into a bathrobe. The shape of her body underneath it was all too apparent, and when I imagined what she'd look like without the bathrobe, steam almost came piping out of my ears. Strange, wasn't it? We were in best friend mode —aw, but come on! Even if we were friends, being alone with her in a hotel room in our bathrobes was just downright embarrassing!

A stylish bell chimed, and a room service lady arrived to pick up our clothes. Mai opened the door and gave her our laundry bag. With that, we no longer had any way to go out, so we were stuck there in the hotel room until our clothes came back.

There was a beat of silence, and then Mai took up the reins of leadership once more. “All right,” she said, “I’ve run a hot bath. We’d both best warm ourselves up before we catch a cold, Renako.”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” I said. “So, Oduka-san…you can go ahead and take the first bath.”

“Don’t be foolish.”

Eeep! She was giving me that look again!

“Do you really think I can take a long, leisurely soak and leave my best friend waiting here alone?” Mai asked. “You’re coming in with me.”

“With you?” I repeated. “Wait, you mean like *together* with you?”

She grabbed my wrist and yanked me forward. In my astonishment, I didn’t think before letting out an ear-piercing scream.

And that’s how I ended up in the bath with her so close we were practically stuck together. The water sloshed over the side of the tub from the displacement of two people in it. I was so mortified I couldn’t bear to look at her. But there was no reason to be self-conscious around someone who was a friend, so I figured my emotions must have glitched out on me. It was just because, theoretically, none of this should have happened.

Mai exhaled a puff of hot air. “I apologize for the poor timing,” she said. “I do agree that being friends right now, as opposed to lovers, does mean we can be more relaxed about touching one another. As a result, I’ll have to save my wiles to show off at another time.”

Why on earth was she apologizing for that, of all things? I fiddled with the scrunchie on my wrist and snuck a glance at Mai’s face to try to figure out what she was thinking. She had been so pushy up until a few minutes ago, but now she seemed her typical calm self. Sure, it would have been disastrous if she’d gotten all frisky on me in this situation, but at the same time… *Argh, no!* We were friends, we were friends, we were friends, I admonished myself, chanting the words over and over like a magic spell.

Desperately, I forced myself to sound chipper. “Wow, check out these *awesome* bath salts! Now *that’s* what I call a fancy hotel! Let’s give *them* a shot!”

“You’re not very good at changing the subject, did you know that?”

Pretending not to hear her trying to shoot me down, I became even more unrealistically animated. “*Ooh*, and this yuzu citrus scent is *so* good! It *has* to be in vogue this year!” Believe me, as embarrassing as this was, there was nothing more embarrassing than being in the same bath with Mai!

Even as I was cringing on the inside, I carried on my one-woman show until Mai couldn’t take it any longer and started to giggle. Yes! I won!

“What am I going to do with you?” she sighed. “Still, I do apologize. For suddenly taking you to a hotel room.”

“I keep telling you, don’t word it like that,” I said. “Anyway, you’re always pretty pushy, so don’t go worrying about that now. If anything, I feel like I should be the one saying thanks, since you paid for the whole thing. We’re friends, so I’d like to split the cost, if it’s possible.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I don’t mind paying for it this time, because it works out in my favor.”

Hearing Mai’s refined, ladylike voice right next to me made me feel kinda embarrassed. I made sure that my tone didn’t sound too upset and then asked, “So, Mai, what’s the deal with that job you mentioned? You’re going overseas to help your mom next week?”

The moment I said it, I felt a heavy silence next to me. Oh, crap. Looks like I’d screwed up another topic change.

Mai answered in a rather emotionless voice, “My mother treats me to so many luxuries, you see. That’s why, whenever possible, I don’t want to give her any reason to worry.”

I peeked at Mai’s face. She was close to me. Real freaking close. I instinctively turned away again. Oh great, my heart was going nuts.

“So, uh. I guess you consider that kind of stuff too, huh?” I stuttered. “I heard your mom’s a fashion designer, right?”

“Yes, and she’s always bustling about overseas. She has so many amazing models to work with from all over the world, but sometimes she calls me in anyway. As her daughter, it seems I play a role that no one else can. So I’ll be taking some time off school and going to

France."

"Wow."

"She's why I've been lucky enough to have so many privileges. I have to be grateful to her. I don't have the right or the reason to refuse her anything she asks of me."

Mai hugged her long legs close to her and rested her cheek on her knee just as if she were a toddler. If anyone else had heard what she'd just said, I bet they would have thought she was lucky to be living the high life. I mean, her mom was famous and super rich, and Mai herself got to tour around as a model. For a moment, I wondered what someone with such youth, beauty, and talent was doing being my friend.

But what came out of my mouth was something completely different.

"Sounds like you have it rough too, Mai."

"Huh?" she said.

"Oh, uh, never mind." Great, three flubs in a row!

Without thinking, I put my hand on my chest and started beating myself up for what I'd just done. Yet when Mai looked at me, there was this totally transparent, vulnerable look on her face.

Wait, so, *was* that a flub? I couldn't really tell.

"Why do you think that?" she asked.

"Oh, uh, I mean," I mumbled. It felt really awkward to say it now that she was looking right at me, but this really wasn't the right moment to say that, so I stumbled my way through my explanation. "Well, you said earlier that you wanted people to, like, see who you really were, you know? I was just thinking that it must be totally exhausting to constantly have to try to live up to people's expectations. And having all that pressure weighing down on you must be pretty heavy, right?"

I was about to add a little punchline ("But I'm one to talk, 'cause I don't even live up to my own expectations!") and then laugh it off, but Mai leaned in close to me. Hello?! My shoulders jerked.

"Yes," she said. "Now I remember. This is the very part of you that made me fall in love with you."

“R-really now,” I said. “But I mean, this isn’t that much. Anyone would say the same thing.”

Her face got even closer, so close she was on the verge of stealing my breath away. *Eep!* We were naked! We were both naked!

“But no one else has.”

“Huh?”

“But no one has ever been there for me like that. Everyone envies or admires me, and it’s been like that ever since I was born. It was always best for everyone else that I acted like a queen, and so I’ve disciplined myself to act that way.”

“I-I think that’s incredible.”

I wasn’t trying to flatter her; I genuinely did think that was incredible. She lived in a world I could barely imagine, but I still gave it a try. What if Satsuki-san saw me as a rival? What if Kaho-chan idolized me?

Bleh. Within five minutes, I’d have been screaming, “No! I can’t live up to your expectations for me!” There’s no way I could have given it my best shot.

“I-I get it, Mai. It’s okay. Because no matter what fantasies other people have about you, to me you’re the malicious, horny weirdo you truly are.”

I tried to push Mai as I said it, but, oddly, she just laughed. “That’s true,” she said. “You’re the only person who would describe me like that.”

Scrunchie around my wrist, I waved one finger in the air and declared self-importantly, “Hey, what can I say? That’s what best friends are for.”

Keep in mind that I was still naked and also still facing a likewise-naked Mai.

“A best friend is someone who knows who you truly are,” I said. “Someone who really gets you. They do stupid stuff with you and go wild with you when things are fun. And in hard times, they don’t need to say anything—they’re just there for you. That’s what I think the perfect friend is.”

Mai was silent for a moment before, with an expression like she

had just seen magic for the first time, she mumbled, “That’s what you think a best friend is?”

Way to sap my confidence!

“Uh, yeah,” I stuttered. “I’ve never had one before, but that’s the kind of friend I’d like to have in you.”

“I see. That really does sound like a wonderful relationship to have.”

Hearing Mai agree with me made me perk up a whole lot. “Right?” I said. “That’s why I keep telling you. Being friends is the way to go!”

Yet no sooner had I said that than Mai caressed my ear. I yelped and almost leapt out of the tub as I felt an immediate response in my waist region. This was an ambush!

“I would indeed like to have that kind of relationship with you,” she said. “But if you were to ask me, I’d classify that same relationship as being lovers.”

“Wha… What?”

“I plan on getting to know who you really are. I’ll mess around and be silly with you, have fun with you…and, of course, I will always be there for you when things get tough. I plan on holding your hand and putting my arm over your shoulder. Is that really so different from what you want?”

Mai’s eyes as she looked down at me were so sincere that they took my breath away.

“Of course it is!” I exclaimed. “B-but I mean…friends and lovers… you know, they aren’t…”

I wanted to refute her, but the words just wouldn’t come out. I felt like Mai and I had been on different pages this whole time, and now I finally understood why. From the start, she and I had been looking at the *same thing*.

What was this feeling? Was I…happy? Mai and I had been thinking of the same things. It was just that my perfect friend had turned out to be what Mai was calling a girlfriend. Yet, on the other hand, I also felt like there was a huge, fatal difference here!

As I began to panic, Mai laid her hand on top of mine. “Of

course," she said, "there are also huge differences between friends and girlfriends."

"W-what do you mean?" I said. "No, wait, I don't want to hear! Nope, I'm starting to feel dizzy! Better wash my hair and get out!"

"Good thinking. I should wash my hair too since it's still damp."

Then, right before my eyes, Mai undid her barrette with a snap and let all her hair spill out. Her smooth golden locks flowed out around me and brushed my cheek.

Oh no. Was this—

"Naturally," she said, "one needs to let their hair down to wash it, don't they?"

Her voice oozed with seductiveness. She had shifted into girlfriend mode!

"No, wait," I cried. "What do you think you're doing switching it up on me with no warning? Also, isn't this cheating?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "I'm just putting it down to wash my hair."

"Okay, but then what's your hand doing? Why're you pushing me into the side of the bathtub? Hey, wait, no, you can't just freaking touch me!"

All the power coiled up in Mai's tall frame came slamming down as she pinned me with a firm touch near the pit of my stomach. That was one of my vital regions!

"Because," she said, "I'm here taking a bath with my cute girlfriend. Isn't it so considerate of me to wash my girlfriend's hair for her?"

"So you *are* in girlfriend mode! What the heck, Mai? Didn't we say we'd be friends today? What, does your hair control your personality or something?"

She laughed. "Oh, Renako, my lovely, yapping puppy."

She lifted my chin in a way that was all too flattering on her. I didn't know what had lit a flame inside Mai, but this girl was absolutely going for it.

"M-Mai," I stuttered. I could feel my soul about to yield and give in when she stared at me with such forceful eyes! "Okay, I get it, Mai.

Let's talk it out. Let's talk it out. Let's…"

As I kept repeating that, I tried to use both my hands to push Mai away, but my body wouldn't move. Mai's lips parted slightly, showing me a hint of pink tongue inside her mouth.

"Even if I tell you in words, you won't believe me, will you?" she said.

"No, I will! This time I swear I'll believe you, so please—" But I wasn't able to get those final words out.

Her lips closed the distance and then pressed against mine. I felt her touch me for just a moment. My eyes snapped open wide. Mai was so close to me her face filled my entire vision before she moved away again.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa." My whole body trembled, as if her lips had paralyzed me. I was sure my face was bright red as I sat there with my mouth flapping. "Th-that was my first kiss!"

Mai looked deeply moved and touched her own lips. "It was mine as well. It feels truly wonderful to touch the lips of my destined lover."

"Yeah, well, our lips weren't the only things touching!" Pinned in on all sides by Mai and the bathtub, our boobs were getting squished in the space between us. But wait, that wasn't the issue here!

"Having my f-first kiss with a girl is like," I began, "well, I'm getting more atypical by the minute."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "This is the twenty-first century. It's totally standard for girls to date each other now."

"Are you sure? Or do you only think that because you're off living in your own little world?"

A pure white sheet of drawing paper is never the same once a drop of black ink touches it, and that's the same way I felt then. I pushed Mai away. "Okay, you've had your fun, now stop already."

A gleam of lust still sparkled in Mai's eye.

"What, you haven't had enough?!" I cried.

"I always thought I was somewhat more of a rational person than this, but your lips are like the forbidden fruit to me."

"Hey, what? No!" I'd had enough. I made to snap the sex-crazed Mai back to her senses, but she used that slight gap in my armor to

shove her leg between my thighs.

Hey, this position was no bueno! Her legs were touching me! In places! In certain no-no places!

And while I was utterly distracted with that, she stole another kiss. Maybe because it was the second time, but it came to me then how soft and moist her lips were, how marshmallow-like.

"Mmph!" I cried. "Mmphmmphmmph!" All the strength was rapidly draining from my body. I felt like her lips were filling up my entire being with her Mai-ness. At this rate, we were going to start making horrible, horrible progress on that girlfriends list of hers! No! This was already bad enough.

I had only one choice! I wrapped my arms around Mai's back, just like I was giving her a hug and accepting her in body and spirit…but I wasn't.

After the kiss went on for several moments, she raised her head and gave me an inquisitive look. "Renako?" she asked.

I'd been completely melted down to the core, so I whispered with teary eyes and a voice as thin as the whine of a mosquito, "This round doesn't count."

She blinked in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Steam and the scent of Mai's perfume enshrouded the tub. As she held me in her arms that were as white as snow, I—I who could never forget the sensation of her lips, which would be etched inside me forever— chuckled and let a grin play out over my face!

I swear I wasn't acting stubborn or being a sore loser.

"Because," I said, "you're my best friend right now."

"You can't just declare something like that this late in the game," she said. But then she noticed it too. I had taken my own scrunchie and given her a side ponytail. Her hair was tied up. That made her my friend, and that meant—

"You sometimes hear about friends kissing or talking about kissing as a joke," I explained. "So, this doesn't count. It doesn't. Right?"

Mai stared at me intently. "Right."

"Okay, so, on that note!" I pulled through! I'd won! I nodded my head, pleased with my own quick thinking, when I suddenly realized

that Mai was giving me the same lustful look the boys in our class gave our friend group.

Oh, crap. That probably wasn't good. For some inexplicable reason, I remembered the moment I fell off the roof. The whole wondering if I was dead thing.

Suddenly, Mai kissed me for a third time. It was different from the other two kisses. Something all warm and slippery slithered into my mouth.

"Mmph!" I spluttered. What the hell was that? Her tongue?! No way. No way, no way, no way. Mai's tongue was inside my mouth and running wild! "Mmphmmphmmph?!"

I'd heard people talk about this kind of kiss. Mai's tongue was flip-flopping all over mine and slobbering up every last bit of the inside of my mouth! Aaaaagh! I could feel in this kiss her persistence—she was trying to prevent me from trying to pass it off as a joke. It was a strong, agile raging storm within me, one with such sizzling passion I felt like *I* was going to get burned.

This was bad news. I was going to die. Clinging to Mai, I desperately tried to withstand the onslaught.

When it was finally over, my cheeks were wet with inexplicable tears. I panted as Mai slowly parted from me. A sticky thread of spit bridged the gap between our lips. Talk about risqué! My body couldn't move any more than a fish could swim out of water. With my back still plastered against the side of the bathtub, I let out a wordless whine. This adult kiss had left far too much of an impact on me.

In contrast to how I was listlessly sinking into the tub, Mai licked her lips, beaming. Then she said, in a voice that rained down on me as gently as a warm shower, "That was a friend kiss, so it doesn't count."

I didn't laugh. "Y-yeah, that doesn't count…"

Our eyes met, and this naked girl who'd experienced my first kiss with me cupped my chin with a gentle hand. Like someone feeding a baby bird, she gave me another light kiss.

"I love you, Renako," she said.

Those words had a far greater effect on me than that earlier, self-centered kiss of hers. Reproaching her for such a pushy kiss was beyond me, and of course thanking her for it was entirely out of the question. In

the end, it was all I could do to retort hoarsely, “What are you talking about? I’m your friend.”

Oh, hell. Now we’d completely crossed the point of no return.

Afterwards, we changed back into our freshly dried clothes and checked out of the hotel. The sky had become so cloudless that the big storm seemed like a joke. Mai’s earlier comment about changing the weather to suit her needs flashed through my mind.

She was her usual self on the way home; meanwhile I was at a loss for words and felt a persistent ache in my chest. All I’d wanted was to talk with her about games again or some other kind of meaningless chatter. Not this.

Finally, as we were about to leave, I managed to speak up. “You know,” I said, “I’m pretty darn sure I told you not to force me into doing things against my will.”

“If this had been one week prior, I would have agreed that this was against your will. But that wasn’t really the case this time, was it?”

“…I don’t know about that.”

…Yeah, this was bad.

All those fun experiences playing VR together as friends had been completely overwritten by this mess. It was like the whole day got sidelined by those kisses, and here I was just wishing we could have gone on having fun like that forever.

And what was even more frustrating, really darn frustrating at that, is that after it was all over…I still felt like we’d just spent a really special time together. Mai was practically pulling my strings at this point. Ugggghhhhhh. There was this weird feeling in my chest that I didn’t know how to put into words.

If it meant I was going to feel like this, then I’d absolutely rather have been friends instead of lovers! Those two were the same thing? Please. What a fat load of bull!

And yet, no matter the strength of my convictions, my heart kept beating so rapidly that night that I couldn’t get to sleep.

Chapter 3:
There's No Freaking Way We'll Do It Against My Will!

THERE WERE TWO WEEKS left in the month of June when it occurred to me that the impact one's first kiss had on a person varied widely from individual to individual. There were some folks, for instance, who thought of kisses as nothing more than skin touching skin. (I, of course, fell into that camp!) That probably also meant that, for others, a single kiss could change their entire life.

But in modern-day Japan, a kiss was just a kiss. Getting hung up on one forever only meant that you'd be left behind as the speed of daily life and the passage of time passed you by. Yup, I resolved to myself. It was time to forget about it. After all, I had been the one who'd insisted it didn't count when it was only a friend kiss. And if my heart skipped a beat every time I saw Mai's face, or ached every time I remembered the heat of her mouth as her lips met mine? Well, I must have been imagining things.

And, so.

"You're really staring too much," Satsuki-san told me one day when she passed me during lunch break.

"Wha?" I said, startled. Was that directed at me?

"Did she do something to you?" Satsuki-san asked. "You're staring at her like you've lost your soul."

"Well, um," I said. The "she" Satsuki-san was looking at was none other than the resident perfect superwoman, Mai. "W-well, you know, it's not for any particular reason. I was just thinking that she's looking glamorous today, that's all. The usual thing."

Mai was due to leave that afternoon to spend a week in France, and the whole class was abuzz with the news. Literally everyone was crowded around her, having a grand old time. Mai stood in the center of that circle of people, handing out that hundred-dollar smile for free along with every gesture. The only thing she needed to do to look good was breathe. That's because she was *the* Oduka Mai. It wasn't even a matter of her insanely gorgeous features or beautiful demeanor. The real factor that made her so eye-catching was that she possessed that

thing people sometimes called “it.”

Eep. I had started staring at her lips again.

As I chastised myself for that, Satsuki-san suddenly spoke up and said, “Amaori. Have you ever thought that the world would be a better place if we were all like Oduka Mai?”

“Um, no?!” I squeaked, somewhat louder than I had intended. I was just so shocked by that random, bizarre question. Talk about switching topics.

Satsuki-san wasn’t a fan of loud noises and, sure enough, she winced when I yelled.

“Oh, sorry,” I said.

“No, it’s fine. By the way…” she said, as my head started to droop in embarrassment at my mistake, “there’s no call for you to look that upset.”

Satsuki-san was as hard on other people as she was on herself, so talking with her one-on-one like this always made me a ball of nerves.

“Have you ever thought that, Satsuki-san?” I asked. “That the world would be better if we were all like Oduka-san.”

“It isn’t a question about *ever*. That is my chief philosophy.”

Seriously? Yikes.

“You and Oduka-san were good friends before high school, right?” I asked.

“Well, yes, I suppose. But I do wonder if I might have turned out a bit cheerier, had I met her later on in life.”

I didn’t have a clue how to respond to that, but fortunately Satsuki-san kept talking anyway.

“I don’t know if we are good friends so much as…toxic friends, perhaps? The number one reason why I stay with her is because it gives me the opportunity to see her in distress.”

“Wait, is that the legit reason?”

As I attempted to puzzle out how to handle this conversation with Satsuki-san, it came time for Mai to leave. Our classmates waved her goodbye as, bag in hand, she marched past them like an elite businesswoman off to depart on a work trip.

“I’m heading out now,” she said.

“Oh, have a good trip,” Satsuki-san said.

“Yup, we know,” I chimed in as we waved her goodbye. *Don’t be disappointed that she didn’t give you a meaningful signal with her eyes, Renako,* I chastised myself. *You’re nothing special. You’re just her ordinary friend. Don’t be disappointed!*

That’s when I had a sudden realization. “By any chance, Satsuki-san, when you say that you think the world would be a better place if everyone was like Oduka-san, is that because you think she’d be upset to find herself totally average?”

Satsuki-san looked kind of startled. “…Pardon me?”

“Oh, uh, I mean, I’ve thought that kind of thing before, so, you know.”

“Amaori.”

My heart skipped a beat when she said my name. “Y-yeah?” I asked. Mai may have been exceptional, but Satsuki-san was still gorgeous enough to be a top beauty of our whole grade.

Her long, almond-shaped eyes suddenly narrowed. “You seem different recently,” she accused. “Is something going on with you and Mai?”

“Jeez, Kaho-chan said the same thing the other day, but, uh…”

Uh, yeah, we kissed! But I couldn’t say that (duh).

“Um, uh, yeah, uh, maybe a bit…” I admitted, fiddling with my hair.

I tried to avert my eyes, but even then, there was no escaping from Satsuki-san. “What, did you fall in love with her? I only want to advise you that it’s best if you gave it up now.”

“No! No, no, no! No! No freaking way would I fall in love with her!” I cried. I wasn’t the one falling in love over here! It was Mai falling in love with *me* which started this whole shit show anyway!

“Kaho already asked her out,” Satsuki-san confided to me. “Right after the first day of school.”

“Wait, for real?” My eyes widened in shock.

Just then, a text message popped up on my phone. *Gah!* It was

from Mai.

We won't be able to see each other for a while, it read. *I'll miss you. Would you join me on the roof for a few minutes of alone time?*

Yikes. I stared down at the screen in my hand when Satsuki-san asked, "Is that from Oduka Mai?"

Dang, could this girl see out of other people's eyes or something? "Huh?" I cried. "Oh, uh, I dunno! Maybe it's a message from God!"

She stared at me for a moment and said, "Were you always this much of a comedian?"

"Oh, sorry to cut you off there, but I need to run to the bathroom!"

"Oh, really?" she said. "Okay, I'll come with you."

"Wait, why?"

She frowned at me in confusion. "Because I need to use the restroom…?" Her expression looked totally natural, but what if she was acting? What if she had figured out what was going down with Mai and me?

"Oh, uh, never mind!" I stammered. "I don't have to go anymore! I'll just, uh, wait for you here."

"Really…? Well, I do need to go, so…" She looked at me with deep suspicion as she left, but, thanks to my quick thinking, I managed to escape from the clutches of Satsuki-san's interrogation. Phew! Got away safely.

Wait. Maybe Satsuki-san really just needed to use the bathroom after all. Also, why was I so desperate to go and see Mai?

Eh, whatever. Better hurry up to the roof for now, I thought.

Which Mai was it going to be today? Boy, I hoped she had her hair up.

I opened the door to the roof, and I covered my face instinctively as a gust of wind immediately came blowing in. A figure stood there, backlit by the sun. Her golden tresses fluttered in the wind as she elegantly reclined against the fence. It was an exact role reversal of the day when we'd first met up here. But, since this was Oduka Mai we were talking about, her version of it was picture perfect.

She turned her head, sunlight glinting in her hair. “I’m glad you could make it, Renako,” she said.

I was so mesmerized by her beauty that only then did it hit me. “Your hair’s down!” I cried.

“Oh, yes. The wind felt so nice, you see.”

“You just take every excuse you can get now, don’t you?” I closed the door behind me and plastered my back against it. “L-look, I’m just here to talk, okay? I know we’re alone up here, but don’t get the wrong idea.”

“Seeing you so frightened of me really gets me going, you know.”

I yelped.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding.” She beamed at me, but I couldn’t give her even a hint of a smile in return.

Mai walked up to me, and I thrust my hands out to stop her. “Whoa, hold on!” I reminded her. “We’re at school, remember? No doing anything indecent to contaminate my good, holy schoolhouse!”

“So, anything that’s holy is fair game?”

“No ‘anything’ in general!”

But in no time at all, Mai was up in my face and grabbing my wrist. She was right before my eyes, grinning at me with a smile brighter than the clear blue sky.

“I-I’m telling you,” I spluttered, “we shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

When she looked at me with those eyes, I couldn’t bring myself to lie to her. “Because,” I admitted, “then I won’t be able to think about anything but you.”

Mai’s gaze burned with a passion far hotter than the June sunshine.

“I really like you,” she said.

“I-I really like you too…as a friend.”

She pushed me up against the wall. *Eeep!* I couldn’t meet her eyes.

“Mai,” I protested, “isn’t it almost time for your flight?”

“I have a fantastic driver,” she said. “There’s no need to worry.

More importantly, I want to savor this time I have with you."

I made a little whining sound. Mai's face came closer and closer. As she looked down at me like this, she put me in mind of a playful dog coiling around me for attention. It was embarrassing, but not only that —I was absolutely positive that Mai was sending me a Certain Feeling.

"I-It's only going to be for a week," I insisted.

"I probably would have said the same thing once," she said. "But now I feel like any time I don't see you, even when it's just after school, stretches on for eons. And above all, it's in the middle of our competition."

"I-I get lonely when I can't see my good friends too! So c'mon, back off a little! Go away! Come on, you're way too warm! Down, girl!"

In spite of my commands, the mutt acted like she hadn't even heard me.

"Oh," she said. "You mean we feel the same way?" She giggled. "I can smell you, Renako."

"You're an idiot!"

I tried to shove her face away, yet even though I put my back into it, Mai didn't budge a bit. "You're way too strong," I told her.

"That's the power of love."

"That's the power of muscles, actually!"

Then she nibbled on my ear. *Eep.* My whole body went limp. "F-foul!" I cried.

"You're so cute, Renako. Oh, tell me, why are you so darling? Say, when we graduate, will you marry me? Let's make our home together. I'll be the breadwinner."

"Is this a proposal?! What kind of timing is this?!"

I turned my face to her without thinking, and she swooped in and planted a kiss on my lips. *Gah!* The feelings and heat that poured out of her mouth and into me were so intense that I began to feel like I didn't care what she did to me anymore…

But then I shoved Mai away and wiped my mouth.

"I keep telling you," I panted, "not at school."

"You do," she said. "But I thought it'd make for a bit of a cooler

farewell today."

She put a hand to her mouth too, in a rather un-Mai-ish way. "Ever since we kissed the other day, I feel like I've been sick."

Mai's face was bright red. Seeing the supadari be this embarrassed only served to make *me* feel more embarrassed.

"I started wanting to think of you," she said, "24/7." She put her hand to her chest and tilted her head downwards. Her eyelashes fluttered in the breeze, glistening.

Seemed like I wasn't the only one who became super conscious of my partner when we passed the point of no return with that kiss, huh? Wait, if anything, it looked like the feelings were hitting Mai more directly than me. At this rate, she'd fall even further in love with me!

Wrapped up tight in Mai's embrace, I did my best to declare, "I won't lose! Not against you! Because being friends is better, hands down!"

She patted my head lovingly. "And on that note," she said, "I must be off. I will miss you terribly, but I will endure the pain."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Get going already. Scram."

She gave me one last strong hug, and then, with a big grin, Mai left.

The bell rang. At this rate, I was going to be late for class. But I didn't move. Leaning up against the wall, I wrapped my arms around myself and whispered, "I can still smell her."

Then I groaned and covered my face with my hands. What was I doing mooning over her lingering scent, like a girl head over heels in love?

"Forget about Mai!" I yelled. "I am going to enjoy my time in high school! And to hell with that—that pushy, egotistical brat!"

Even this, me yelling all by myself up on the roof, sounded just like someone whining about their girlfriend. How freaking obnoxious.

That night, I was having dinner with Mom, Dad, and my sister when Oduka Mai showed up on TV. It was just a little news segment, but they were doing some sort of special feature on Japanese people at a fashion show in Paris, and so there was Mai in all her glory, parading

down the runway. My mom and I both ooh-ed and aah-ed in wonder.

"Hey, look, Dad," I said. "See that girl right there? She's come over to our house before to hang out with me."

"Huh?" he said. "Really?"

"Yup. She's my friend," I boasted.

My social butterfly sister in the chair next to me narrowed her eyes and gave me a chilly glare. "Come on, Oneechan," she said. "You're exaggerating again—or not even, you're just flat-out telling lies. I'm not going to call you oneechan any longer. You're going to be 'hey, you' from now on."

"No, I'm serious!"

My sister helped herself to a piece of fried chicken from the mountain on the table and shook her head. Trying to convince her, I said, "Mai and I are attached at the hip at school!"

"Hey, you. Pass the mayonnaise."

"You're really starting that already? Come on, Mom, back me up here!"

My mom put her hand to her cheek and squinted at the TV. "Hmm," she murmured. "I have to say, no matter how I look at it, it wouldn't make much sense for a girl like her to come to our house."

"Mom?! I mean, you're right, but it literally happened! Don't try to deny the truth!"

No matter how I ranted and raved, my three family members carried on like nothing was happening, going on about how nice the food had turned out. I must not have been all that convincing…

But wait, maybe that wasn't it either. I stared absentmindedly at the TV. Mai looked like nothing so much as a beautiful model, the kind of person I would never have been able to meet in a million years. If I was still like I had been in junior high, I knew I wouldn't have been able to say a peep to her, even if we shared the same class. Sure, turning over a new leaf for high school and all that, but even so, I really had gotten a lot more courageous since junior high, huh? I'd fallen off the roof, gone into a hotel pool, taken a bath with another girl—it almost felt like a dream. Mai looked too high-class and out of reach when she was there on the TV screen. But, hell, forget coming home with me, this girl had actually kissed me…

I grumbled away internally, but at the same time, I had to wonder. What if I was just being full of it? What would I do if this was all a figment of my imagination?

"Hey, you," said my dad. "What's wrong? Are you not hungry?"

"See here, you," said my mom. "I thought I'd done a good job frying the chicken tonight, so you'd better eat up."

"Now even you two are in on it?!" I cried. "Wait, but Mom—you seriously did meet her, didn't you?"

***

When Mai wasn't there, everything felt like it had gone back to being normal—just an ordinary, Joe Schmoe high school. Okay, well, about as normal as a school for high achievers could be, but still. Nothing was different, per se, but it felt kind of like someone had turned down the fluorescent lights just a tad.

One lunchtime, I sat at my desk and zoned out, staring out the nearby window into the rain. Pretty Ajisai-san sat in the seat in front of me, likewise spacing out with her chin in her hands, displaying a complete lack of desire to get up and do anything.

"I feel like I'm going to doze off, don't you?" she said. "It's 'cause Mai's not here."

"For real," I agreed. "Plus, it's the rainy season now."

Staring into the rain brought memories of the kisses after our date in Odaiba flooding back. I heaved a big, weary sigh. There was no escaping that girl.

"Without Mai here, even Kaho-chan's looking down," Ajisai-san said. "She's going around complaining that she doesn't know what to do."

"Yeah, I feel that."

"And Satsuki-chan's been all worked up talking about how she's going to use this time to close the gap and beat Mai's test scores."

I laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like Satsuki-san all right."

At this rate, I figured that Ajisai-san would be snatched up by

another friend group for sure. In the short time since Mai had left, my old companion was back… Hello, loneliness, my old friend… Urgh, my stomach was starting to hurt. Sure, being around people was exhausting, but my weak little heart also hated being excluded from things! And I was a coward who couldn't even invite people to hang out with me! *Yeah, that's it,* I thought. I needed to show that I could make it happen even without Mai around. Or else I'd be caught up in her wicked wiles for life!

"Um, hey, Ajisai-san," I said.

"What's up?"

"If you don't have anything else going on today and you're, uh, okay with it and all, uh, do you want to, uh, go somewhere with me maybe?" I forced myself to smile stiffly.

She was surely busy, so she'd turn me down, but even then, the fact that I had taken action was what I needed! In order to free myself from the curse of Mai!

"Yeah, sure!" she chirped.

My eyes snapped wide open. "Huh?" I cried. No way. She'd just answered me right off the bat.

Wait, was this a trap? This had to be a trap or something, right? Some kind of test to catch those who were oblivious to social cues?

But, to my untrained eye, Ajisai-san looked excited, all sweet and bashful. "This'll be the first time we've ever gone anywhere on our own, right?" she asked. "You're not big on issuing invitations."

"Oh, um, uh," I said. "You're just so much better than the rest of us mere mortals that I couldn't possibly approach you first…"

She laughed. "What are you talking about? We talk all the time, don't we?"

Ajisai-san's fundamental style was to sit passively and wait for other people to invite her. Considering how long the line of inviters was and how rarely it was ever one person's turn… Was suddenly getting dragged out of line and bypassing the rest of the queue like having a backstage pass? When did I get my hands on one of those?

"What's with the VIP treatment?!" I cried.

"VIP?"

“Nothing. I was just thinking that, with how many people there are inviting you to hang out, you must be booked solid every day.”

“Huh?” she said. “What’re you talking about? It’s not like that at all. It’s just that I keep going out with people because they’re kind enough to invite me. So, thank *you* for inviting me out today.”

Her hair hung over her ears as she bowed politely to me. Her smile seemed like it could purify me.

“I must offer you my thanks as well!” I cried. “Thank you for letting me enjoy the pleasure of your company!”

That’s how I ended up with plans to hang out with Ajisai-san after school. Of course, it didn’t count as cheating. After all, how could it be cheating if Mai and I were just friends to begin with? Ugh, this made no sense.

My plans to hang out with Ajisai-san had me on cloud nine. But the minute homeroom ended, one of the girls in my class came up to me.

“Um, excuse me,” she said. “Amaori-san, would you like to walk home with me today?”

“Huh?”

Then, to my further surprise, another girl joined in. “Hey,” she said, “you should also give us a chance! We’re just a group of regular girls, but how about it? Sometimes we want to rub shoulders with the cute girls too!”

“Huh?” I repeated. “Wait, did you say cute?”

These were Hasegawa-san (the quiet one) and Hirano-san (the outgoing one). They were in the art and literature clubs, if I remembered correctly. We chatted occasionally because we sat near one another, but *huh*?!

“D-did you just say cute?” I stammered. “And you meant, uh, me?”

“O-of course!” said Hasegawa-san. “Amaori-san, you’re super cute! Your skin’s so clear and smooth, and you have such a bright smile! You’re the cutest girl in the world!”

“And you’re so easy to talk to,” Hirano-san chimed in. “Even

though you're super popular, you always feel so approachable."

"G-gosh, you think?" Hearing them spoil me and lavish compliments on me was starting to go to my head. Wasn't I supposed to be an unsociable loser at heart?!

Oh no… I had plans with Ajisai-san after school. I made myself smile, but my personal rule against turning down invitations left me with such a heavy feeling in my stomach it was like I'd downed two boba teas in a row.

I opened my mouth and went, "Um."

And just then, who should appear but Ajisai-san with a big grin and a "Let's go, Rena-chan!"

"Oh, uh, yeah, Ajisai-san. I'm just finishing up, uh…"

When the other girls saw Ajisai-san standing next to me, their mouths dropped open in shock. Both Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san's cheeks turned red.

"Oh my god," Hasegawa-san murmured. "Amazing… Her eyes are so big… Her face is so tiny…"

"Eeek… She's so pretty… I can't look at her up close, or I'm done for…"

Wha?! Both the girls stared blankly at Ajisai-san, spellbound. She looked back at them in confusion.

Uh, hello? What happened to me being the cutest girl in the world?

"We thought we had a chance since Oduka-san isn't here," Hasegawa-san murmured. "But this was much too reckless, no two ways about it."

"We live in a completely different world," Hirano-san sighed. "I'm sorry, Amaori-san! Don't worry, we won't ever bother you again! Bye, see you later!"

"Nooo," I groaned, arm outstretched, as the girls zoomed away. They didn't even attempt to hide their "OMG, we're talking to someone who's waaaay above us" attitude!

Ajisai-san tilted her head in confusion and went, "Hmm? What's wrong? Did they need something?"

"No, don't worry about it… Let's go, Ajisai-san."

I took another good look at her. She was so pretty, all soft and fluffy like those luxury macarons that cost a couple hundred yen a pop. Didn't that mean I wasn't worthy of speaking to her either? Oh great, there I went down that rabbit hole again.

"Ajisai-san," I said, "if I took a bite of you, I bet you'd taste sweet."

"What?! That's freaky!"

Even the face she made when she was startled was too freaking adorable.

We set off for a department store in Shinjuku to search for a newly released line of makeup products Ajisai-san wanted to check out. She pulled me by the hand across the makeup floor. Everyone around us looked super stylish. I could not have been more out of place.

But hey, I had an angel with me! Oh, angel, please guide this clueless mortal.

No sooner had we arrived at the appropriate sales counter than Ajisai-san started eyeing the new lipstick with all the seriousness of me trying to decide whether I wanted udon or soba for lunch at school.

Dual wielding two summery lipsticks like a pair of beam sabers, Ajisai-san spun around. "Which do you like better, Rena-chan? This one, or this one?"

What a sly move, like what a girl would do on a date to get her guy's attention! And Ajisai-san pulled it off like it was second nature for her!

But all I used was the cheap crap, so I didn't have the slightest idea what was good and what wasn't. Still, Ajisai-san hadn't asked me "Which would look better on me?" but "Which do you like better?" That was great news for me, because it meant all I had to do was point at whichever one caught my eye.

"Uh, um, let me see…" I said. "Okay, the pink one!"

"Really? I was just thinking I like this one better too."

Woo-hoo! A big win for me! I mentally fist pumped.

Then, immediately after that triumphant thought crossed my mind, it occurred to me that, she might have said that regardless of

what I picked. My thoughts soured. Yup, I was a hardcore pessimist!

Ajisai-san smiled sweetly and called over a shop attendant to ask if she could try on the makeup. Wow, they let you do that in department stores? I had no idea.

Then, for some unknown reason, she plunked me down in front of a mirror too. “While we’re here,” she told me, “Why don’t you also give it a try?”

“What?!”

Wait, I didn’t have that kind of money!

As I watched Ajisai-san get her own lipstick touched up, a pretty young lady in a suit came up to me and beamed. Oh lord.

“What are we doing for you today?” she asked. “Would you like the same thing as your friend?”

“Oh, um, no, uh,” I stammered. “Sorry, I don’t have a lot of cash on hand, so…”

The lady tittered. “Then I have just the thing. What do you think about trying a sample of our latest product? I’ll give you a free one, and if you like it, you can always come back here again.”

“There’s really no need to go to all the trouble for me.”

“Oh, no, I insist.”

Armed with the beautiful, jewel-like lipstick and that signature department store lady grin, she put a hand on my cheek and began to work. *Ohhh lord.*

“Do you like wearing makeup?” she asked me.

“Huh? Oh, uh, I don’t know… I just watch a lot of videos and try to copy what they do, you know?”

Oops, that really just slipped out. I must have disgusted her…

But the sales lady only giggled at me in a way that suggested this couldn’t be further from the truth. “I see,” she said. “You’re an honest one, huh? In that case, maybe you’ll be one of our future customers. Do your best, and you’ll be as cute as can be, won’t you?”

“Oh lord,” I breathed.

After toying with me for a while, the enthusiastic sales clerk plied me with a mountain of sample products before finally setting me free.

Ajisai-san, who had bought the new lipstick, walked next to me, grinning at me with shiny lips that looked just a tad more mature than normal.

"She sure was high energy, huh?" Ajisai-san said.

I laughed. "Yeah, she really did a lot for me."

Ajisai-san stood in front of me and stared intently at my face. Her lips looked so glossy that I gulped instinctively.

"Yup," she chirped, "you look super-duper cute, Renako!"

Having an angel declare, with all her might, that I looked cute made my cheeks burn immediately.

"That's, uh," I stammered, "only because the lady's good at makeup and because the lipstick's so high quality, right?"

"Well, doesn't that just mean that if you get better at makeup and get your own stock of products, you'll always look this cute?"

"N-no, no!" I cried. "No freaking way!" I waved both hands to refute her. This was getting too spicy for me! Too spicy!

"Anyway, Ajisai-san," I said, "that really looks good on you. Seriously, you look unbelievable."

Ajisai-san was pretty enough to begin with, so for her to get even prettier was like an archangel had descended upon the earth.

As I sang her praises, Ajisai-san giggled sweetly. "You really think?" she said. An embarrassed look flashed through her eyes, and then she went "Smooch!" And with a pucker of those new-lipstick lips, she blew a kiss at me.

Oh my god… C-cute…

I thought my heart was about to stop. I whipped out my phone and held it at the ready. "Ajisai-san, do that again!" I squealed. "Do that again!"

"Wait, are you filming me?"

"Because that was so freaking cute! Don't worry, I won't show anyone. It'll just be for me to take home and enjoy on my own! Encore! Encore!"

This second smooch was a lot more subdued than the first and came with a blush. Now that I'd caught it on tape, I vowed to hold on to this and cherish it forever. What a good day to be alive! But maybe I had gone a bit overboard in asking that of her… Whenever I was around Ajisai-san, my heart started performing violent jumping jacks.

After that, we went upstairs and were wandering around when Ajisai-san casually took my hand. Hello?!

"Oh, sorry, do you not like holding hands?" she asked.

"No, it's not that, it's just…like, why? Do you like me or something?!"

I hadn't meant to say it, but what I was really thinking slipped out.

However, Ajisai-san just responded calmly, with a total "Why would you even ask that?" attitude. "Yeah, of course I like you," she said.

What?! That super-duper shook me up. This was all Mai's fault, because she'd laid a curse on me that forced me to take everything in a weird way. It didn't help that this was coming from Ajisai-san, of all people! Not to mention we were still holding hands.

Her fingers were smaller than Mai's and so adorable that I was flipping out. As Ajisai-san walked next to me, as cheery as could be, I couldn't believe my good luck. These kinds of things didn't just *happen* to me. Somewhere the powers that be were getting ready to yank it all away.

"Hey, do you mind if I vent a bit?" she asked.

It was already here. And so soon? This was too frightening.

"Uh, yeah," I said. "I'm sorry."

"What're you apologizing for?"

She smiled at me again. I knew for certain she was about to hit me with something like, "You see, Rena-chan, there's someone in our friend group who I just can't stand no matter how I try, someone whose name starts with A and ends with ko."

But what she said was, "I mentioned that I have two little brothers, right? I'm always nagging at them for everything at home."

"Huh?" I cried. "Ajisai-san, you can get mad?"

“Yeah. Like all the time. They’re always taking stuff out and not putting it away, losing their things, skipping their turn to clean the bathtub, and being too busy gaming to answer me.”

“You’re such a big sister,” I breathed. Ajisai-oneechan… It had a good ring to it, but I didn’t have the courage to say it out loud.

“That’s me. That’s why Oneechan sometimes needs to go hang out with cute girls and suck up all their femininity.”

She bared her canines at me like a vampire and then gave a bold little giggle. *Cute.*

“I mean, if you’re looking for femininity, I think mine’s measured in pico units,” I admitted.

“This was my first time coming out with a friend to buy makeup, and it’s been really fun,” she told me. “Thanks for coming with me today, Rena-chan.”

As she said that, she gave our intertwined hands a little squeeze. Oh god, I was blushing. No, no, no! Ajisai-san liked me as a friend, and she was enjoying my company as a friend. She was only being so super expressive because she was an angel who had no issues with making other people happy.

And that meant that my heart skipping beats around her was entirely my problem! What the heck, man? Why did I keep wanting to sneak a peek at her lips?! Was I into girls now? Of all the ridiculous things.

“What’s wrong?” Ajisai-san asked. “Why’d you stop and grab your head? Oh, are you not feeling well?”

“No. I just feel like that moment when you step out of a dungeon you can’t go back into. And it’s only then, after you’ve already overwritten your save, that you realize you missed a treasure chest.”

Yup, the powers that be had really yanked that good luck away, all right.

Then I heard someone call, “Yo!” I lifted my head.

“Hey, isn’t that Sena and Amaori? Are you guys shopping?”

Hot guys! Okay, no. They were my classmates Shimizu-kun and Fujimura-kun. As far as I could recall, one of them was in the basketball club and the other did soccer, but I couldn’t tell you which was which.

At any rate, they both were tall, broad-shouldered, and handsome. In front of these two hot guys, I became a total nervous wreck. I could barely talk to girls, let alone casually chat with the most eye-catching guys in class! Yet of course Ajisai-san, her hand still in mine, didn't have the slightest hint of shyness.

"We sure are," Ajisai-san said. "Funny place to run into you two here, huh? Are you picking up a present or something?"

"You got it. A birthday present for this dude's girlfriend," Shimizu-kun said.

"Yeah," added Fujimura-kun, "but we pretty much already got what we came for. So how about we go grab some tea together, ladies?"

Ajisai-san smiled and said, "Ooh, let me see."

I slipped my hand from hers and took a step back. Ajisai-san was nice to everyone, so I figured she'd invite me along too, on the pretext that four's better than three.

But when I stared down at my empty hand, I was hit with a sudden memory—this same thing happened long, long ago. To be more exact, it was in junior high. Someone invited me to hang out with her and the boys, but I had been so nervous and unsure of what to say in front of a bunch of guys that I'd held back and turned them down with a, "No thanks, I'll pass."

Then, the next day, the person who'd asked me came up to me and said, "Hey, Amaori, why'd you turn me down? That was pretty rude of you. I'm not going to invite you to hang out again."

I don't think I was mad at the time. I didn't cry, either. I think I only stood there grinning away like a complete idiot. Maybe she hadn't liked my attitude. So, I became a loner. And it was over something as little and stupid as that.

It was one of those things where I'd just caught her on a bad day. She was one of the popular girls in class, and after that she started ignoring me for no particular reason. I never tried to push back publicly, and no one paid any particular attention to me as I went along with the flow. I remained alone right up through graduation.

I don't mean to paint it as this big traumatic incident or whatever, but ever since then, I couldn't help but be super aware of what other people thought about me. And turning people down became the most

frightening thing in the world to me.

I *really* didn't think I could handle hanging out with the guys, but…no, I had no choice. I would be okay. It was just that it'd ruin all my plans with Ajisai-san and make me crash the minute I got home. No big deal. I could stick it out through anything if it meant I wouldn't have to spend three years of high school as a loner!

If only Mai were here, though. She'd come to my rescue for sure, tugging on my arm and pulling me away like she always did.

As I spaced out, I felt an unconscious flicker of anger at my own daydreaming. What was I thinking? This wasn't good at all. That was just using Mai for whatever I wanted, which flew in the face of my image of a perfect friend. A true friend was someone who'd be there for you without any calculated self-interest. That was my goal, but how much of a coward was I if I fell back on Mai the moment things got inconvenient?

It frustrated me. Sure, Mai was incredible and could do anything, but that didn't make any difference. At this rate, I wouldn't be able to hold my head high and tell her that I wanted to be her friend instead of her lover. She was over in France doing her best. That meant that I needed to use my own words and turn the guys down! (Never mind the fact that this was way easier than what she was doing!)

"Hey, Rena-chan, what do you think?" Ajisai-san asked, urging me on in place of the boys.

I took a deep, resolute breath. To hell with the past. To hell with junior high. I was a changed woman. And I was going to find my true friend here in high school!

"Sorry!" I yelled. "I don't want to—"

THUMP!

Overcome with dizziness, I'd collapsed on the spot.

"Rena-chan?!"

Turned out I had a little case of anemia.

"Hey, Amaori," said Shimizu-kun. "You gotta get some fluids in you."

"Are you okay?" asked Fujimura-kun. "Want me to walk you

home?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine…" I said. "Sorry about this." I took the bottle of Pocari energy drink that Shimizu-kun handed me and clutched it in both hands as I rested on a bench on the landing. These two were so kind. And here I was—fine up until I'd decided to turn them down but then too mentally weak to go through with it.

"Thanks, guys," Ajisai-san said. "I'll keep an eye on her from now on, so she'll be okay."

"Gotcha," Shimizu-kun said. "Then we'll be heading out, but you take care now, okay?"

"Hey, what?" said Fujimura-kun. "Isn't it kind of mean to just ditch her?"

"Look, dumbass, it's better to let a girl handle this kind of thing. So long as we're around, all we'll do is make her self-conscious."

"Oh, it's one of those things, huh? Sorry, I was being stupid. See you guys at school, then."

Thank you, Shimizu-kun and Fujimura-kun… Popular guys like them are so kind to girls. Sorry that I'm the one with all the weird hang-ups around guys…

The awkwardness got even worse once they left me behind with Ajisai-san. I felt super guilty.

I began to say, "Um," but Ajisai-san beat me to the punch and apologized, "I'm sorry, Rena-chan."

Wait, what was she apologizing for? Was she about to say "I'm sorry, I just don't have the courage to be friends with you any longer?" This was the end, wasn't it? Then, let me weep bitter tears. I steeled myself for the consequences of my own actions.

"You're not really comfortable around guys, are you?" she said. "Or more like around people you don't know, I guess. I should have turned them down before that. I'm sorry."

I broke out in a cold sweat. "But, no, um, uh," I stuttered out, faltering as I went. "If you were going to have more fun hanging out with them, you should have gone ahead, even if it meant leaving me behind."

"No, I shouldn't have." She glared at me with reproachful eyes. "I

came here to hang out with you, so what's the point if you're not having fun?"

She grabbed my hand. *Eeep.* Hers were so soft.

"Aren't I here to hang out with *you*, Rena-chan?" she pouted. Then she followed that up with a big grin.

I stuttered out an apology for the misunderstanding, but Ajisai-san still had more to say. "I'm really not that much of a perfect little goodie-two-shoes. You know that, right?"

"Y-yeah, I do."

She pointed a finger right at me. "Do you? Do you really? I can be pretty selfish, not to mention short-tempered."

With that finger right in front of my nose, I nodded woodenly. Maybe Ajisai-san, just like Mai, was sick and tired of the image everyone else pushed on her.

"I-I'll be sure to keep that in mind," I promised.

"Good. So long as you get the point." She giggled. "Hey, you know, whenever I'm lecturing my brothers, I grab their hands just like that. The kiddos always get really embarrassed, and it makes them actually listen to whatever I have to say. It's my secret big sister strategy."

"It's a little weird having you tell me that," I admitted. I could feel all the blood coursing through my body. My heart was pounding like crazy!

"Anyway, how are you feeling?" she asked. "Can you stand? Do you feel like you can walk yet?"

"Yeah, I'm totally fine now. Sorry for all the trouble."

"Really? Okay, that's good then." She stood up and extended a hand. "Let's go home now. We'll hang out again later, okay, Rena-chan?"

Her smile was so radiant I could practically see the wings and halo around her. She might have been a selfish and irritable older sister, but there was no denying that Ajisai-san was an angel too.

As we made our way home, I saw an ad at Shinjuku Station for a game that had just come out. I stopped in my tracks and went, "Ooh."

Ajisai-san, who was walking beside me, turned her eyes to the billboard too upon seeing my reaction. “You play video games, Rena-chan?” she asked.

“Huh? Uh, no, not really! Just a little bit!”

Ajisai-san pulled out her phone and snapped a photo of the billboard. “That’s cool,” she said. “I play video games with the kiddos and stuff, you know? But I’m a huge fan of the previous game in this series, personally.”

What’d she just say? I launched myself at her without thinking and grabbed both of her shoulders. “M-me too!” I yelled. “I like games too!”

Then it hit me in a flash what I was doing. Oh, crap. I’d just pulled a total creepo move. Just because we shared the same interests didn’t mean I could bust out the wild over-enthusiasm! Any minute now, Ajisai-san would express her discomfort and say—

“Oh wow, really? That’s funny. I didn’t think you’d be into that kind of thing. What sort of games do you play?”

She was a literal angel!

On the train ride home, I did my very best to not rapid-fire talk my mouth off at her, flaunting all the tidbits of minor trivia I’d picked up from developer interviews and what not, but instead calmly, calmly, calm, calm, oh-so-calmly talked to her about games. Ajisai-san, for her part, seemed to enjoy herself as she listened to me.

And then, to add icing on the cake, she said, “Oh wow, you bought that one, huh? I’d love to check it out myself.”

“I-iIn that case,” I began. I gulped down the offer to lend it to her once I’d finished with it. Instead, I summoned my courage just like I had done earlier today and, once again, tried inviting her to hang out. “W-would you like to come over to my house and play it sometime?”

Ajisai-san beamed at me. “Can I?” she said. “I’d love to!”

Wow! I could die happy. I thought I’d only ever win this lucky break once in my life, but here I was about to hang out with Ajisai-san again. Had I, just maybe, figured out the knack to being a social butterfly?

“Ajisai-san,” I cried. “Let’s be friends!”

“What, weren’t we friends already?!”

Sorry, Mai. While you were far, far away, signs pointed to me making a new friend… Mwa ha ha…

***

Mai kept spamming me with messages. I was getting out of the bath and putting on some of the skincare products I’d gotten at the department store, realizing that the good stuff really did make a difference after all, and opened up the app on my phone. She’d sent me a ton of photos—some theater in France, her posing in front of a café. They looked straight out of a magazine spread.

“Did I seduce you?” she texted me.

I sighed in weary disbelief at the sheer confidence. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Good luck at work,” I texted back.

Then the phone rang. A bit nervously, I held it up to my ear. “H-hello?” I said.

“What’s wrong?” said Mai. “You’re being a little standoffish, aren’t you? Are you sulking because you miss me so much and want me back? That’s cute. You’re cute, Renako.”

“You are *so* wrong!”

I tried to sound threatening, but Mai just laughed even at that. Same old, same old.

“Relax,” she said. “I have my hair up right now. I’m your best friend.”

Well, now that she’d said that, I couldn’t be so rude to her. That cheater.

“Oh my god,” I sighed. “Oh yeah, I saw you on TV. I thought you looked super cool.”

“Really?” she said. “Now I feel self-conscious. Did you fall in love with me all over again?”

I shot down Mai’s wily attempt to slip across the boundary line. “We’re friends, remember?!”

The fact that Mai called all the way from France just to talk to me

made me feel like my lips were tingling, but I must have been imagining it. It was just the good skin toner. Yup.

"So, how're things going over there?" I asked. "Work coming along okay?"

"Naturally," she said. "It is me we're talking about, after all."

Seems like the supadari of Ashigaya High carried on that same role on a global scale.

"Well," she admitted, "that is, I wish I could say that, but I don't even think it'd make a difference if they had someone else instead."

"What do you mean?"

"All I'm doing is sitting in a chair and smiling, or telling them the words they want to hear. Every so often, I change my clothes and strike a pose."

"I don't think I get it," I admitted. "Isn't that what being a model is all about? The important part's having a unique body."

Mai was oddly silent for a moment before she said, "Here, the important part is being my mother's daughter."

"Huh?"

When I asked for clarification, that strangeness in Mai's voice completely vanished. "Never mind," she said. "I was saying something weird. Forget about it."

I frowned. "I can't just forget it that easily. C'mon, we're best friends right now, aren't we? I'm not going to ignore something my friend says when she's far away and sounds so lonely."

Funny how I couldn't say what I wanted to in front of Ajisai-san and the guys, but it all came out naturally when I talked to Mai. Even I had no idea how it'd worked out that way.

I could hear a bit of a giggle from the other end of the line. "Oh, I really like you, you know," she said, her voice so breathy and full of emotion that for a moment I couldn't say a thing in response. "It's not a big deal. I just wanted to vent about a minor issue."

I figured I'd try teasing Mai by doing a little Ajisai-san impersonation. "N-no, it's really fine. Tell me whatever's going on. I know this isn't the school roof, but I'll still listen and accept whatever you have to say. Come on. Try telling Renako-oneechan what you're

feeling."

"Renako-oneechan, huh? If I had an older sister like you, I bet I'd let you dote on me every day."

"And if I had a little sister like you, I'd get depressed being compared to you every day."

"Then why not let me dote on you?"

"At this rate, this is turning into a codependent relationship."

Mai laughed. *Embarrassing,* I thought. If only I hadn't said that stupid oneechan thing!

"To me," Mai began, "a lover is a very special person."

I was fully aware that this topic could easily drift into dangerous territory, but all the same, I'd said I'd listen to anything, so I had no choice but to sit there and listen.

"They're someone that's precious to you, someone who can't be replaced by anybody else. To me, you're that person."

"Aw, come on, but—"

"You're always asking, 'Why me?' But it's because you were there for me at the right place and the right time. Destiny doesn't mean there was someone out there waiting for me. The fact that I met *you* was destiny."

That was only her trying to explain it after the fact, I thought. Sure, it was pretty miraculous that she'd saved me from falling off the roof. But I was pretty sure there'd be a day just around the corner when Mai would realize that it wasn't destiny after all. And yet, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to tell her that. Maybe…it was because I wanted to think of Mai as that special person.

"Then that means you think I can't be replaced with anyone else?" I asked.

"Of course I do. There's no one in the world who could replace you."

I could certainly think of a few options, but whatever. I hesitated before responding, "Well, me aside, I don't think anyone can replace you either."

"Is that really true?" she said.

She sounded ever so slightly desperate, so I hit her with that big "Of course," seal of approval. I wasn't talking about her incredible looks or being the supadari or whatever. "There's no other girl in the world who could be as pushy in pursuing me."

I went with that because I was a little worried about when and if I might actually fall in love with Mai for real. Not that I would ever tell her if it happened! Forget falling in love—I'd had my fair share of falling from the roof incident, thank you very much!

"Thank you," Mai said. "I feel a little better now… You're a very kind person, do you know that?"

Mai's whisper, lacking all of her usual forcefulness, traveled all the way from my ear to melt my heart. The feeling of distance on a phone call was dangerous indeed, I realized.

I rushed to change the topic. "Not really," I reminded her. "I'm the same as anyone else. Anyway, what time is it over there? What're you up to right now?"

"It's the middle of the day. I'm going to be on standby for a while, since we finally wrapped up this part of the shoot just a few minutes ago. I was looking at your picture and grinning away the whole time."

"When did you get a picture of me? You're embarrassing me."

"Don't worry. I told everyone that you were my girlfriend, *ma chérie*, and they all told me how cute, *parfaite*, you were."

"Now I'm even more embarrassed! What'd you go and do that for? Wait, and why were you showing them my photo?!"

"Because I'm proud of my girlfriend."

"Friend! *Friend!*" I insisted.

"So," she said, "is there anything new on your end?"

"You gotta learn to listen to a girl," I sighed.

Then I told her about my first time hanging out with Ajisai-san alone. "She seemed really interested in playing this game, so we're going to give it a shot tomorrow at my place," I bragged in a totally "heh heh, good for me" kind of way. I was so hyped to hog Ajisai-san to myself for two days in a row that I didn't consider how Mai might take the news.

"Oh my," she said. "Alone with her? How interesting."

Her voice had grown chilly all of a sudden. Why had I waited until now to hang out alone with Ajisai-san, it seemed to ask. Didn't we always hang out in a group of five? She hesitated a moment longer before saying, "I see. I never thought you'd be that kind of girl."

"Huh? What kind of girl?"

"You really invited another girl into your room when you have me already? How you toy with a girl's heart."

"Hey, hold the phone!" I cried. "Ajisai-san is just a friend!"

"Are you a wicked woman who cheats on me the instant we go long distance?!"

"You're having a huge misunderstanding!" I yelled. I wasn't sure what, exactly, she was misunderstanding, but whatever! "Anyway! It's not like we're real girlfriends anyway, so aren't I free to hang out with whoever I want?"

Why on earth was I arguing this point anyway? Now it sounded like we actually *were* dating!

"Fine!" she said. "Do whatever you want! Because at the end of the day, we're just friends!"

"Weren't we always? Why'd you suddenly go and start throwing a snit fit?!" God, I did not understand this girl! "Anyway, I kept telling you not to kiss me, and then you kept doing it anyway! Maybe it's time for you to have a taste of your own medicine and see what it's like when your partner does something you don't want."

"You enjoyed yourself, didn't you?"

"Only in your mind!"

"Fine, have it your way! I'll just find a super beautiful girl here and go on a date with her, so there!" Mai snapped.

Oof. I was at a loss for words. I saw on TV that Mai had a whole flock of pretty Japanese models near her. I was just some random girl who couldn't begin to compare to any of them. I could feel myself being ground into dust under the heel of my own inferiority complex.

But Mai was twice as shocked as I was. "No, I won't," she said. "I'm sorry. That was a joke… I was about to throw away my pride for a snide remark. I expect better of myself…"

"O-okay. Gotcha…"

I breathed an internal sigh of relief. *Wait, what?* What was I sighing about?

"Now you should fess up too," Mai said. "You were also joking about hanging out with Ajisai, right?"

"No, that was the truth!"

"So you *are* that kind of girl!"

"Oh great, here we go again!"

And with that, I hung up the phone on her, just as if we were having a real fight. Mai had started acting weirder and weirder ever since we'd had those kisses… At this rate, I felt we'd be having an even bigger—or maybe even a relationship-ending—fight any day now. Man, I *knew* romance was a risky business. If it could make the likes of Mai lose her marbles, then we should have called it quits!

***

In order to distract ourselves from a Mai-less school weekend and all the humdrum boredom that came from our missing supadari, the whole class started making plans to hang out left and right. Yet one person stood out from all the rest in terms of going particularly haywire: Mai's fangirl, Kaho-chan.

She whined, "Maaan, I'm so booooored," grabbed her head in her hands, and threw a tantrum right at her desk.

"Calm down, you sixteen-year-old baby," Satsuki-san chastised her. "My goodness. What's so good about Mai anyway?"

Kaho-chan catapulted herself upright and, rather unexpectedly, wailed, "You all just don't get it! We're super lucky to have class with the supadari because she's *literally* a sight for sore eyes. But now we're all too used to having her around, right?"

Next to her, Ajisai-san grinned and clasped her hands behind her back. "Aw, c'mon. I think we're lucky to have her around every day. Don't you think, Rena-chan?"

"Y-yeah," I said. "She definitely raises the value of our uniforms."

"That's not what I mean!" Kaho-chan tried to throw her arms around Satsuki-san. "Right, Saa-chan?"

Satsuki-san swooped out of the way. “I can’t say I agree,” she sniffed. “Whether or not Mai is here hardly affects our day-to-day lives at school, does it? We still have the same daily tasks to do, after all. If anything, it’s a relief that she isn’t here being such a bother anymore.”

“But then how come you look so lonely when you don’t have a rival around to compete with every day?”

Satsuki-san didn’t have a good comeback for that one.

“Hey! Whoa! Stop trying to beat me with your book!”

As Kaho-chan incited Satsuki-san’s wrath with her unnecessary commentary, Ajisai-san grinned in amusement and watched their horseplay. It felt like something was lacking when Mai wasn’t around, like listening to music with one dead earbud, but hey, at least things were peaceful. I could live my calm, ordinary life in high school without anything around to throw my heart off-kilter… (I had apologized once again to Shimizu-kun and Fujimura-kun and brought them soft drinks as thanks. Those two were so kind.)

…Wait a minute. What? Had my MP been running out in the first place because I was so nervous about having Mai around?!

And so, I made it to the end of the school day. I chuckled to myself. Today was the day that Ajisai-san and I had plans to hang out together.

“Let’s head on home, Rena-chan,” Ajisai-san said.

“Let’s! With pleasure!”

After Mai, Ajisai-san was the second friend I’d invited home in that month alone. Turning over a new leaf for high school? Please. I’d turned over the whole plant.

I shooed away the mini-Mai in my head that glared at me and yelled, “So you’re that kind of girl!” and headed off, side by side with Ajisai-san. The train ride home was pure bliss. We even carried on a conversation the whole time without any awkward pauses, although that was simply due to Ajisai-san having herculean powers of communication. *Don’t get the wrong idea, Amaori Renako,* I reminded myself.

We arrived home—welcome inside, and thank you for coming! Then, the moment I opened the front door, I bumped right into my little

sister. She was always coming home late because of her badminton club practice, but, just my luck, today she was home! But hey, I didn't mind.

I beamed as I flaunted Ajisai-san. "I'm back," I said, giving my hair a little self-important *flip, flip*. "Oh, and I brought over a friend today."

As I had expected, my sister about jumped out of her skin and produced a voice from somewhere in the vicinity of her spinal cord that said, "Oh my god! A cute girl!"

"Nice to meet you," Ajisai-san said. "Are you Rena-chan's little sister? Thanks for calling me cute."

Ajisai-san's smile could charm the pants off anyone, even my sister. Well, that's because she was my friend, after all. *My* friend.

"Oh, yes!" my sister said. "Sorry, that was rude, and it totally slipped out. Um, thanks for always watching out for my sister, even if she has no redeeming qualities and is the picture of mediocrity."

Apart from that extremely unnecessary final comment, my sister executed a flawless introduction. That's the sporty, peppy extrovert type for you.

"We're going to go hang out in my room now, so don't bother us," I said. *(Flip, flip.)*

"Oh, Ajisai-san," my sister piped up, "can I get your email later?"

"Sure thing."

"Hey!" I snapped. "She's here to hang out with *me*, thank you very much!"

Dammit. I couldn't let my guard down even around my own sister. She scurried away, watched on with a scowl from me and an angelic smile from Ajisai-san.

"I can totally tell she's your sister, Renako-chan. She's really clever, unlike the kiddos. You know, with that whole calling me cute thing." Ajisai-san giggled.

"I think she and I have similar taste… Wait, uh, never mind!"

To cover up that verbal slip, I ushered her into my bedroom. "Now, what game do you want to play?" I asked.

"Oh, wow," she said. "You have a ton. This is way more than we have at our place."

“Y-you think? Isn’t this about as many as everyone else has?” The reason I had so many games was thanks to that phase in junior high where I did literally nothing except hole up in my room and play video games.

Ah, to look next to me and see Ajisai-san sitting in my room… Such bliss. No, wait, this wasn’t the right time to stare at her and shiver in admiration. She’d say something like, “What’re you looking at? Creep.” No, but I knew Ajisai-san would never say anything like that!

“Oh, let’s play this one,” she said. “I’ve been interested in checking it out.” But the disc she was holding in her hand wasn’t the one we’d seen on the billboard yesterday. It was the one I’d played with Mai a while back…

Mini-Mai once again berated me in my mind. But there was a smiling Ajisai-san right in front of me. Yeah… Yeah! Look, Mai and I had played that fighting game too! And besides, I could always make it up to her and play this one with Mai again later!

“Sure!” I cried. “Let’s do it!”

Just like the time when Mai had come over to play, we sat next to each other as we faced the TV.

“I should warn you ahead of time,” she said, “I’m not that good at games, so I’m sorry if I drag you down.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” I told her. “I’ll carry you! I won’t let anything touch so much as a hair on your head, and I’ll blow every enemy to smithereens before you can even see it!”

“So does that mean I won’t be able to do anything?”

Whoops. I had gotten a little carried away there, huh?

“I-In that case,” I said, “I’ll bring their HP down so you can take them out in one hit.”

“Come on, let’s just be normal about it.”

Laughing, she knocked her shoulder against mine. *Eep! Body contact…* And she smelled nice…

“O-okay,” I said. “That’s how playing games with friends works, right? Being normal is best, being normal…” But what was normal anyway? I’d never played with anyone else besides Mai!

I was so crazy nervous I started pouring with weird sweat even

just gripping the controller. I felt frozen stiff as we started the game. But my games were so second nature to me, I easily slipped back into my normal self and began playing flawlessly when—

Ajisai-san squealed. I jolted.

"Oh my god, how embarrassing," she said. "I screamed really loudly." Waving her hands frantically in front of her face, she smiled to hide how red her face was. There was no freaking way I could keep my cool…staring agog at her cute face in profile…

Back when I played with Mai, she really bought into the whole ranger squad roleplay thing, being like, "I sense an enemy up ahead. All right, you take cover. I'll take point." Hold on, what I was doing? I couldn't be thinking about another girl when I was right there with Ajisai-san!

"You're really cleaning up in this game," Ajisai-san said. "Do you have the enemy spawn points memorized?"

"Aw, no, these are just lucky guesses." More like I'd *accidentally* memorized them all…

"You're cool, Rena-chan."

"Huh? Oh, you mean the character I'm using? Yeah, they're cool all right." *Careful, careful!* I'd almost just misunderstood horribly.

"No, I meant that it's cool how good you are at video games," she said. "You're awesome."

She thought that my gamer skills were cool? Boy, I did not understand Ajisai-san's values.

"Hey, Rena-chan," she said, "do you want to come hang out at my place next time?"

"Yeah, I'd absolutely love to."

"Really? Oh, good."

Thank goodness for holing up in my room and playing video games all day if it made Ajisai-san want my company.

"My little brothers are going to be so excited when they hear that someone who's good at games is coming over to play," she went on. "You're going to be a hit with them."

In that case, she really meant it. But considering that Ajisai-san was such a big sister at heart, maybe this was a good thing. Ajisai-san's

little brothers were into people who were good at games, huh?

"Hey, uh," I began, "I'm asking just for information, but what does it take for you to be into someone?"

"Huh?" she said. "What, do I seem like I have super high standards?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I'm just, you know, asking out of curiosity."

We paused for a brief break at a save point, and as I put down my controller, Ajisai-san followed suit and looked up. "To be honest," she said, "I don't really have a type. I think it'd be nice to be with someone who's fun to hang out with, but that's not like my hill to die on or anything. Oh, if I had to say, then I guess maybe someone I can feel safe around, you know? I don't think I'm that fond of those scary people who are all like, 'Hey, you're coming with me.'"

"I know what you mean," I said. "Scary people like Oduka-san."

"No, Mai-chan's nice. All the girls in our group are good kids."

"Ugh, you're killing me with that older sister vision!" I groaned. Imagine calling Mai or Satsuki-san kids. For real, was Ajisai-san a divine being sent down to Earth to watch over the good deeds of mankind?

"Ooh," she said. "Are you into someone right now?"

"Wh—huh? N-no…?"

"It's elementary," explained Ajisai Holmes, with her arms folded across her chest. "In my experience, when someone starts asking about someone else's love life, it either means they like the other person or they already have a crush on someone else."

Wait, but. "By that logic," I pointed out, "doesn't that mean I like you?"

"True," she said. "Wait, you do?" She slapped her hands over her mouth and flushed.

"N-no, I don't!" I cried.

"Ooh, I see now. Wow, you really startled me." She giggled. "I was thinking that this is the first time a female friend has ever told me she likes me."

"But I don't?! I li—okay, never mind, but my point is that I don't!" I frantically tried to deny the accusation, even rising to my feet. But was

all this desperation having the reverse effect?!

Ajisai-san looked up at me as I panicked. “Aw,” she said. “You don’t? That’s too bad.”

“I-I’m sorry…” I sat back down.

Ugh, my face was all hot. And Ajisai-san looked amused for some reason.

“By any chance,” I asked, “are you having fun messing with me?”

“Oops, you could tell?”

“Hey!” I cried.

As I started towards her, Ajisai-san fell to the floor with an “Eeek!” She looked up at me from where she’d fallen on my carpet, hair all disarrayed. The sight of her was kinda sexy. Uh-oh. She’d shifted into fallen angel, temptress of humanity mode! Manipulating me with darkness and light in turn! But, considering it was Ajisai-san doing the manipulating, I didn’t think I’d mind… It was all Mai’s fault that I’d become the kind of girl who thought this kind of crap about her friends, wasn’t it? Urgh, how vulgar of me! Mai’d really done a number on me!

“Urgh, sorry, Ajisai-san,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she told me. “I forgive you, although I don’t know what for.” She made an okay symbol with her hands. I was suddenly possessed with the wild urge to fling myself at her for a hug, but I knew through and through that this idea was a product of Mai’s manipulation and thus reined myself in.

Just then, the doorbell rang. I started to turn and look, but then I remembered that my sister was home and would handle it, so I turned back to Ajisai-san.

“Don’t you need to get the door?” she asked.

“It’s fine,” I said. “My sister will take care of it.”

Ajisai-san fixed her hair, and I happily thought to myself how cute she was.

Then a wild thundering of footsteps came barreling towards my room. “H-hey, what’s going on?” I asked, and the door was flung open with a bang. I jumped and turned around at the loud noise, and there stood my sister, looking even more shocked than I felt.

“Oneechan…” she said.

“W-what?”

“There’s this, like, Hollywood actress at the front door.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. That had to be Mai.

Yup. It was Mai.

I had a terrible feeling about this, so I had Ajisai-san wait for me in my room and left my sister behind to keep her company. Honestly, I wondered how smart it was of me to leave the two of them alone in there, but now wasn’t the time to go bringing that up.

Mai stood at the front door with a huge grin on her face. “Hello, darling,” she said. She wore a thin suit that showed off every detail of her impressive frame, along with tall heels and oversized sunglasses pushed up on her forehead, making her truly look every inch the Hollywood actress. To round it all off, she carried a bouquet of flowers in her arms. Oh no, they were red roses. They suited her all too well…

“W-why are you here?” I stammered.

“Well, you see,” she said, “work wrapped up early. I was originally planning on doing some sightseeing before leaving, but I cut that short and came home a bit sooner than expected.”

“But why?!”

She chuckled. “You’d really like me to tell you why? Because I missed you, of course.”

“And not to mention,” I added, “your hair’s down.”

Mai held out both arms to hug me, but I stopped her. Hold it, hold it. I now had to hold the line of defense on my doorstep like my life depended on it. “H-hey now,” I reminded her, “now’s not a good time. Didn’t I tell you already? I’m having Ajisai-san over to hang out today.”

“Perfect,” she said. “Then we can all hang out together.”

“Are you for real?”

She passed off the flowers to a person who looked like her limousine driver, who took them and left. This girl’s approach to things was just incredible.

Well, considering that she’d come all this way to hang out, I couldn’t exactly turn her away at the door. So, against my better

judgment, I let Mai in.

When we returned to my room, Ajisai-san had the shock of her life.

"Huh? Mai-chan?!" she cried.

"Hey, Ajisai," Mai called. "I'm done with work, so I thought I'd stop by for a bit."

She smiled at my sister, who was sitting frozen stiff in the corner. "And who might you be?" Mai asked. "Renako's charming little sister? It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Oduka Mai."

"Charming?" my sister repeated. "Wait, who are you? Queen Elizabeth?" She shook hands with Mai, looking utterly bewildered. Once Mai let go, my sister stared down at her own hand as if she couldn't believe that this was really happening.

"Hey now," I said to Mai. "Don't go trying to charm my sister."

"What do you mean, charm her? You were watching me, weren't you?" she said. "All I did was introduce myself to her."

Ajisai-san laughed. "Sure, but you might have been laying it on a bit thick. I get it, though. I was super shocked the first time I met you too, Mai-chan. Your face is so small I was wondering if you even had a skull."

My sister's head shot up as we started to go back and forth like we always do. "W-wait, you're seriously Oneechan's friend?" she cried.

"Oh, yes," said Mai. "We get along quite well, which I'm grateful for."

"Huh? Huuuh?!" Once again, she looked utterly flabbergasted. *Hey, quit looking around!* I thought. *There's no hidden camera.* Besides, I was the one Mai had asked out, so, if anyone, I had the most right to be questioning what was going on here!

What was I supposed to do about this situation, anyway? My sister showed no sign of leaving; meanwhile, to my right sat the angelic cutie Ajisai-san, while on my left was the gorgeous beauty, Miss Supadari Mai herself. Sandwiched in between the two of them, I started hearing mysterious whispering voices. One, an accusatory voice from Ajisai-san, hissed, *Hey, this is supposed to be* our *time together, so what's Mai doing here?* The other, Mai's levelheaded voice, said, *Cheaters must be punished.* How had I ended up framed as a no-good two-timer?! Weren't

we all friends?!

Mentally, I put my head in my hands in despair. Physically, I desperately called out to my sister, “Hey, do you want to play a game with us? Come on!”

“Huh?! Yes, I’d love to!” This was the first time I’d ever heard my sister sound so happy and polite when talking to me.

And so Ajisai-san, Mai, my sister, and I settled down to play a game together. I figured that if we had plenty of witnesses, Mai wouldn’t pull any funny business. No one’s ever heard of a daytime werewolf, right?

We switched over to a four-player game, a rapid-pace brawler. Ah, this was so fun… What a good way to clear my head… Wait, why was Mai so good at this? I thought this was her first time playing the game. Gah, what was with that girl? She was going *down*!

We got so wrapped up in the game that when Ajisai-san pulled out her phone to check the time, she went, “Oh! Sorry, but it’s already getting late. I need to go pick up my brothers from practice, so I’ll be leaving now. You guys keep having fun.”

She stood up making an apologetic pose, and I half rose too. “In that case,” I said, “let me walk you to the sta—”

My sister snatched my wrist with an iron grip. Her eyes pleaded with me, earnestly begging, “Don’t leave me here alone with Mai-san!” *I feel you there, but still!*

“Hey, Oduka-san,” I asked, “why don’t I walk you to the station too while I’m at it?” I gave her a forced grin, but Mai pretended not to notice.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “I already told them to come pick me up at a certain time. It’s not for another hour and a half. You don’t mind if I stay that long, do you?”

Who said she could decide on that? But before I could say anything, my sister bowed. “Please!” she cried. “Um, uh, Ajisai-senpai, please let me walk you to the station!” Why, that little—! “Come on, let’s go, Ajisai-senpai.”

“Huh, are you sure?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Uh-huh. I’d really like to keep talking with you, so…”

Ajisai-san giggled. “Really? I’m happy to hear that. Okay, then I’ll dote on you aplenty. Rena-chan, thanks for having me over today. I had tons of fun. See you at school too, Mai-chan!”

Then my sister abducted Ajisai-san… But she was mine. Mine, I tell you…!

No sooner had they left than my sister opened the door and poked her head back in. “U-um,” she stuttered. “See you later, Oduka-senpai!”

“Uh-huh. See you later,” Mai said.

Wham went the door as my cruel, cruel sister slammed it shut behind her. Then all was silence, a silence so thick it made my ears hurt.

“W-well, let’s keep playing,” I said. “C’mon, Mai, you’ll never beat me!”

The instant I reached out for the controller, she grabbed me from behind. I squeaked in shock.

“What did you yell for?” she asked.

“Because you moved so quickly!” I cried. “You lecherous wolf! You werewolf! I’ll have you hanged!”

“But I came home a day early just for you,” she said.

“Just for yourself, you mean!”

Mai’s hands twitched. “Yes,” she admitted. “It is. Even though I say it is for you, what I’m doing right now is very much for me. You can see right through all of my wretchedness, can’t you?”

She sighed just behind my ear, and I flinched, my breath catching in my throat.

“Then I suppose I’ll simply have to make it up to you,” she said.

“Huh?”

She laid her hand on my cheek and then suddenly pulled me towards her. With my head turned around like that, she rained kisses down on me like a passing shower. She’d captivated me in one fell swoop. Every part of my body was filling up with Mai-ness.

Reflexively, I shoved her away. “H-hey now,” I said. “Stop that.” I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and glared at her.

My mom and dad weren't on their way home yet, and my sister wouldn't be back from taking Ajisai-san to the station for a while. For the moment, Mai and I were the only two people in the whole house.

Mai put her hand to her chest like a character in a play and lowered her eyes. "I'm burning with jealousy," she recited. "To think that I could hold such feelings for Ajisai-san! Indeed, as you've told me, loving another may involve more than just the beautiful things."

"Oh come on, jealousy… I-I mean, why? I'm nothing special, I just…"

"But you are the girl I love," she said. She took my wrist. I could see in her eyes how much she yearned to embrace me, and it made me feel dizzy.

"I don't get you at all," I said. "There are way, way nicer girls out there, aren't there? Like Ajisai-san."

Mai spread her arms and enfolded me into a gentle hug. "I like you, Renako," she said.

"H-hey now… C'mon, Mai, I'm telling you to cut it out."

Ever since the first time Mai had hugged me tightly—heck, it must have been three weeks ago by now—I'd started seeing Mai in this new, weird light.

"You're so soft," she said. "And you smell nice."

"Y-you're embarrassing me, I tell you!"

This was completely different than the time when Ajisai-san had held my hand. Mai's touches conveyed her feelings to me way more directly—a surging flow of her liking me, liking me, liking me, rushing into me. It was that same feeling again. Swallowed up in the muddy current of her love, I felt like I couldn't breathe.

"H-hey, Mai," I said. "I see you as a friend…"

"But we're lovers right now," she said. "That's according to the rules we agreed upon, right?"

Her lips crawled over my ear. It felt all wet! A shiver ran up my spine, and I went, "Eep."

"Dating, marriage, and so on—they're all alike. They're all about the two people in question coming to an agreement. There's no need to be afraid about what others might think."

“B-but *I’m* the one who keeps telling you no,” I protested. There she went again, deciding other people’s feelings for them. This freaking girl, I tell you…

I tried to slap her on her back, but there was no strength in my hands, and it ended up coming out like a caress, begging her to give me more. But no! No, that wasn’t what I meant!

“I want to have every part of you, Renako,” she said.

“E-every part—every part of me?”

Mai’s lips trailed lower, from my ear to the nape of my neck and then down to my collarbone. My body kept on reacting as if she were toying with me, just barely tickling the soles of my feet.

“Mai, that tickles,” I protested.

“Your skin tastes so sweet, Renako.”

“Wh-why are you licking me?! Why on earth would you even say that?!”

Mai did not respond, but went even further and began to unbutton the shirt of my uniform.

“Wh—are you trying to change my clothes?!” I cried. “What, do you think it’s weird that I’m still wearing my uniform even though I’m at home? Okay, I get the point, but I can change by myself! You don’t need to do that!”

“Renako.”

With the ribbon undone, she took off my outer shirt, lifted up my undershirt, and revealed, naturally, my underwear—my marine blue bra fully on display.

“H-hey now, Mai,” I whined.

“I love you,” she said.

Her everlastingly calm eyes twinkled like all the stars in the night sky, and my breath involuntarily hitched at their beauty. She pushed me down into the carpet and looked down over me. Her glittering golden hair dangled around me like the lace on a canopy bed.

“Mai…” I breathed. She straddled my stomach, but I couldn’t feel her weight at all. She was practically as light as a feather, almost as if she wasn’t a real person. As I lay underneath her and looked up at her, I had one thought: this girl was seriously gorgeous… When she looked

like this, I thought that even if she went to town on me, I'd come away with an experience anyone else would boast about—because it would have been with Oduka Mai, of all people.

"I'm going to take it off," she said.

"N-no, I keep telling you not to," I said.

Her pale fingers slipped into my cleavage.

"I'm still—I'm not ready—not with you—not for this kind of thing."

"I've been wanting to do this with you the whole time," she said.

"I know that," I said. "You wrote it all down on that list."

My body was like an exhibition of lust. No, this really wasn't the right time to say that.

Her other hand reached down and started to inch up my skirt. *Eeep!*

"Why do you want to touch there? Aren't we both girls?"

"I don't know," she said. Her eyes were inflamed with passion as she stared at me intently. "All I know is that right now, I want to feel your body heat."

She cradled my cheek in her hand. It wasn't the touch itself that I disliked. Really, the feeling of her skin against mine felt good. But I thought that if I leaned into it and wanted more of that touch, then that would for *sure* sink my last chance of being friends with Mai.

I pushed Mai back with a shove of my foot. "No," I insisted.

"Oh, your legs, Renako," she sighed. "So soft, and with such a lovely fleshy sensation to the touch."

"A-are you calling me fat?! I mean, I know I'm not a twig like you, but still!"

"On you," she said, "I love it."

"You keep on saying that like it's so simple. That you like me, that you love me…"

"And I always mean it."

Come to think of it, she'd once proposed to me when the opportunity presented itself. Was she telling me that she meant *that* seriously?

Then she declared, “I want us to be real lovers.” Of course, such a statement made when we were face-to-face like this dealt me major damage.

…You know, Mai wasn’t so bad. If I let this play out and let her love me, I’d be a changed girl, wouldn’t I? And anyway, was it even possible for me to become the person I wanted to be?

But that would just be my circumstances changing, I realized. It wouldn’t have anything to do with me changing myself by my own efforts. That’s why I made up my mind. I chose not to take Mai’s hand after all and shook my head.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m still not ready for this.”

There was only one week left in June. I wanted to think it over carefully and make the decision on my own. Mai would be understanding, right? After all, she was my best friend.

“Right, Mai?” I said. “Mai?”

Huh? Where was she looking?

“Um,” I said. She was staring right past my flipped-up skirt and at my undies.

“Renako!” she cried.

“Huh?! D-do you mind?!”

She immediately bore down on them.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I yelled.

“I love you!” she yelled back.

“You already saw me naked! How come seeing my underwear is getting you so worked up?”

“What’re you talking about? If you were anyone else, I would simply tell you to practice a little modesty. But the underwear of the girl I’ve fallen in love with makes for a special case.”

“What on earth are you going on about?! You’re so gross! The school supadari is gross!”

She pinned me down completely and started trying to get her paws into my underwear!

“Don’t worry, Renako,” she said. “I’ll be gentle. Oh yes, today will be a special anniversary for us.” She giggled. “How I love you, Renako.”

“Nooo!”

Her eyes were going gaga, and she was no longer taking in anything I said. At this rate, I’d be losing my virginity to her—even though I had no idea how that worked with two girls!

“H-hey,” I yelled. “Get your head out of my skirt! Don’t open my legs! Stop taking off my underwear!”

“I love you,” she repeated.

“Now is *not* the time to say that! Hey, where are you touching me? E-eep! No, there is no freaking way you can touch me right there! No, no! That is completely off limits! Aaack! Stop it, you numbskull!”

Just then. My door opened.

“Mai-san, Oneechan, I’m home!”

In sailed my sister, with a happy-go-lucky grin.

Me: underwear pulled down to my knees, tears in my eyes, pinned down on the floor. Mai: her face buried in my skirt. My sister: paralyzed with shock, the smile still frozen to her face.

The three of us just looked at each other without saying anything. Then my sister slammed the door on us.

Mai slowly sat upright and cleared her throat with a little cough. “My apologies, Renako,” she said. “I got a bit carried away.”

My hand reached out on its own, and I struck Mai’s cheek with a dry, ringing slap.

“You are the worst!” I yelled at her. “You idiot! She saw the whole thing, didn’t she? This is why I kept telling you to stop! You’re an idiot, an idiot, an idiot!”

Mai was silent.

“I *knew* being lovers would be awful! Now get out of here!”

Mai pressed a hand to her cheek where I’d struck her and looked away, her eyes swimming. She rose to her feet and murmured nothing more than, “Okay. I’m sorry.”

And like that, I'd driven Mai out of my room.

Once I was alone, I huddled miserably on my bed, hugging my knees to myself. "This is the worst," I muttered. "I wish I'd done a better job of telling her no."

But I hadn't, and it wasn't for some reason like being afraid that I might lose a friend in the process. The whole time Ajisai-san was here, I kept thinking of Mai, but once Mai actually showed up, I hadn't had so much as a second thought about Ajisai-san. There was even a brief instant when I'd thought that it might not be so bad to just go with the flow and let it happen. Did that mean that maybe, just maybe, I actually had a crush on M—no, no, oh, no, not that, unless…

"S-she might be a bee in my bonnet," I admitted to myself.

Then there came a knock on the door. "Oneechan," called the person on the other side.

I groaned. That was my sister's voice. I wasn't out of the woods yet! Not only had my sister caught someone trying to get it on with me, but that someone was another girl, no less. What on earth was I supposed to say to my sister now?

For the moment, I decided to wrap my trusty blanket entirely around my head. Oh, blanket, you were my one true friend to the end… I didn't want to see my sister's face just then.

I heard the door creak open.

"Um, hey…" my sister said.

"The sister you are trying to reach is unavailable," I said. "At the tone, please record your message."

As I lay there pretending to be out—an exercise in futility—my sister lobbed a question at me with all the force of an iron ball flung at 160 km per hour: "Oneechan, what kind of relationship do you and Mai-san have?"

I felt like I might throw up. Considering that she'd seen the whole thing, what chance did I have of denying it? I was done for.

"Well…" I said. "Exactly what it looked like."

"Gotcha…"

What was the point of people having feelings? Why, oh why, had I made the mistake of being born as a person, I wondered.

But then my sister let out a sigh of admiration.

"Amazing," she breathed. "Wow, this is so amazing!"

"Huh?" I stuck one eye out from under the blanket and was met with the sight of my sister's face glowing in excitement.

"You and *Mai-san*?" she asked. "How'd you manage to pull that off, Oneechan?"

What on earth was she looking at me like that for? What the hell was that face about?

"U-um, uh…" I stammered. "She just kinda, uh, fell in love with me…"

"With *you*?! But why?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

Was I just hearing things, or was that…respect in my sister's voice? That was respect, right? Did my bratty little sister actually look up to me now?

"Amazing," she said again. "I always thought that you'd get duped by some total loser of a guy, and I'd end up with a terrible brother-in-law. But to have Mai-san as my sister-in-law! This is a game changer! A home run!"

Again with the unnecessary commentary, huh? And hey, it didn't matter if she looked at me with such a hopeful expression, 'cause, uh… *Sis, you know that Oneechan and Mai aren't getting married, right?*

To escape from my sister's hounding questions, I fled to the safe refuge of the bath after dinner. Once I was finally alone, I breathed a sigh of relief.

However, my heart would not settle down, because I couldn't forget Mai's heartbroken expression. I'd gotten all worked up and slapped her… Okay, well, I did think I was allowed that much. Still, when I considered the fact that I'd raised a hand against my friend, my chest ached. More importantly, when I'd slapped her, she'd looked as lonely as an abandoned little girl. Aw, man, for some reason…I felt guilty. Mai had said she'd come by just to see me, but then she left on such a bad note. Well, yeah, because she had gotten carried away, and I

had kept telling her to stop before I blew up…

Ugh, whatever! My thoughts were spinning in circles. Even at the best of times, I still sucked at figuring out human interactions, and this was hardly the best of times.

"Until I can think of something better," I sighed, "I guess I ought to apologize."

Once I got out of the bath, I'd send her a tex—no, give her a cal—no. I shook my head. "I have to tell her in person."

I sighed deeply. All this bother had come about because we were lovers. All this jealousy, all those things she'd done to me, all my loss of confidence when she compared me to someone else, all this loneliness when I'd missed her, all this not wanting to make her hate me if I turned her down—my god, dating was a real pain in the ass.

"Mai…" I muttered to myself. My heart stung. "Mai, you piece of shit."

It was all her fault for asking me out. That's when everything got screwed up. If we could have just stayed friends up there on the roof, everything would have been peaceful. But now she'd turned me into someone who got so keyed up around other girls that it interfered with my social life. Heck, for all that, a single slap was letting her off easy.

I groaned, "Goddamn it, Mai." Even my heart wanted me to knock it off and just recognize this for what it was already. I shook my head with resolve. "At any rate, it's my fault for slapping her. But that's all."

Anyway, there was no way I could tell her. Maybe there were some perks to being lovers, sure. And maybe, just maybe, I was catching feelings for her. But like hell could I tell her that.

I sighed again. "Mai, I swear to God…" I placed one hand on my chest. "I swear that you are going to end up my friend."

I touched my lips. I could still sense a trace of Mai's feelings clinging to them.

Chapter 4:
I Knew There'd Be No Freaking Way, Mai! Unless…

CLOUDS ROLLED IN on Monday morning and stayed for the day, starting me off with a heavy, ominous feeling in my heart. It was the last week of June, but it was too hard to face Mai now, and that left me feeling even more depressed… And besides, it was after *that* incident.

As I washed my face in the bathroom, I remembered the touch of Mai's fingers on my body and the pain in my palm when I'd slapped her. Goddamn it. *Go and apologize, me!* No matter how much of this was Mai's fault, it was still wrong of me to raise a hand against her. Besides, Mai was a model, and her face was part of her job. Sure, it was humiliating as heck for me to apologize to her after she'd just about had her way with me, but still!

To at least get myself into battle mode, I applied my makeup more carefully than usual with my mountain of free samples. Then I fixed my hair and set off for school. However, in spite of all my preparations, Mai wasn't there that morning. It kind of felt like a letdown. Maybe she was busy with her work again, huh?

At lunchtime, the usual crew sat at our desks and ate lunch together. I chowed down on a pastry, but my head was somewhere else. Watching Ajisai-san open up her homemade lunch made my heart skip a beat or two… Since the moment after she'd left the other day, Mai and I had really scuffled with each other.

Satsuki-san was even less talkative than usual, but Kaho-chan looked so energetic it was like she'd sucked the vitality right out of Satsuki-san.

"Do you have something nice going on, Kaho-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

Kaho-chan giggled. "You can tell? Y'see, it's about today. After school, you know." She tittered again.

"Ah," said Ajisai-san. "I smell romantic gossip."

"It's still a secret for now!"

Watching the two of them talk just reminded me of me and Mai

all over again. I wondered if we would ever go back to being on good terms like that. I had no idea, but I knew I wanted to go back to how we used to be all the same. But what was that, exactly? Casual friends in the same friend group? Best friends? Or maybe…?

Man, how was I supposed to make a proper apology with my head all messed up? I was still a bundle of nerves about every little thing because I had zero faith in my ability to handle social situations!

As I sat there off by myself, worrying away, Satsuki-san said, "Hey, Amaori. Can you come with me for a minute after school?"

Huh, this was new. I wasn't really in the mood to hang out after school, but at the same time, I couldn't possibly turn down the invitation. My stomach tied itself in painful knots.

However, Satsuki-san wasn't looking at me with the expression of someone inviting a friend to a hangout. Her eyes were emotionless, almost like glass marbles.

"I want to talk about Oduka Mai," she said.

"Huh?" Without losing any of her mysterious attitude, Satsuki-san had just dabbed a black stain onto my heart.

"Meet me on the roof after school," she said.

But I thought the roof was the secret place for just me and Mai. Huh…? *Satsuki-san, what do you know?!*

The roof was unlocked. But I could have sworn that Mai and I were the only ones with the key… Nervously, I slowly turned the doorknob. I took a timid peek out at the rooftop, but the only thing there to greet me was the overcast sky. Maybe she wasn't here yet?

Then I heard Satsuki-san's voice. "Did you know that they haven't changed the locks on the roof for quite some time now? There are plenty of spare keys lying around."

I spun around to see where her voice was coming from, and her face loomed out from the shadow of the water tower. With her long, black hair and the dark look in her eyes, she was like a witch who'd just materialized out of the shadows.

"Why were you hiding?" I asked.

"So that no one would see the two of us and get the wrong idea."

"What sort of wrong idea?"

She paused before saying, “I’m not sure. But still.”

Well, that was blunt. Normally, she treated me in a pretty friendly way, but there were no two ways about it—she definitely wasn't acting like a friend right now. Wait, did she not like me? Was she about to leave me sleeping with the fishes? I began to tremble.

"W-wait, could I please ask why you chose to speak to me up here?" Her intention was so invisible to me that that timid "please" slipped out all on its own.

Satsuki-san looked bored as she walked over to the short fence. "Suicide."

I jolted.

"Friends/lovers contest."

"Uh?"

"Pool café, Odaiba Plaza hangout, taking shelter from the rain in a hotel."

"How do you know about all of that?" I cried. Did she have ESP? Was Satsuki-san a witch for real?

She chuckled and whirled around to face me. For a split second, the way her long hair whipped in the wind reminded me of Mai standing up here on the roof. I realized all over again that we were alone and that, even compared with Mai, Satsuki-san was one heck of a beauty.

"Well, how do you think?" she asked.

I quailed. Her good looks were so striking I felt a single touch would strike my fingers right off. "A-are you stalking me?" I asked.

"Don't tell me her ridiculously inflated ego has rubbed off on you," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Then, are you stalking Oduka-san?"

Satsuki-san let out a world-weary sigh. "Oduka Mai came to my house yesterday and told me everything," she said.

"Everything?"

"In tears."

"In tears?!" Mai could cry…?

"Mai cries too, you know," Satsuki-san snapped. "Although she doesn't let anyone see her except me."

It was like she could read my mind. Freaky.

"As a result," she continued, "I didn't get enough sleep last night. It's all her fault." Her eyes focused, and I could see a murderous aura emanating from her. I was about to apologize automatically, but then I got the feeling that an apology here would only add fuel to the fire.

"Um…" I said instead. "Why'd she do that?"

"Because she wanted someone to listen to her, I suppose. She was so weak she'd shatter if you touched her."

"But why…?" I mumbled to myself.

Suddenly, a realization hit me. Wait. Hold on a sec.

"You said everything," I said. "You mean, like, *everything* everything?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

All the blood drained from my face. Did this mean that Mai even told Satsuki about the pervy stuff she'd pulled on me? *Please* say psych.

Sure enough, Satsuki-san looked away, embarrassed. "L-look," she said, "don't worry about it. Everyone's free to have their own preferences. I'm not biased just because you're both girls or anything like that."

"That's not the problem! And wait, it's not even like that to begin with! I just, you know, couldn't get her to stop…"

"I know," Satsuki-san said.

"Huh?"

"She told me. She told me that she hurt you."

"…Mai," I mumbled.

Satsuki-san raised her eyebrows when she heard me call Mai by her first name. Then she sighed again. "She said that it must have been pretty frightening to be pursued by a girl you weren't into. She was being presumptuous the whole time, she said. She'd always believed that everyone liked her. Wasn't that an idiotic thing to think? Her words, not mine."

My heart ached as I listened to Mai's wounded monologue. I hadn't expressed my feelings honestly, and, as a result, I'd hurt Mai without meaning to.

“I had one question the whole time I was listening to her.” After a beat, Satsuki-san narrowed her eyes. *“Why Amaori?”*

A gust of wind blew across the roof. The thick clouds slowly parted, and the afternoon sun shone down. Satsuki-san stood her elbow on her crossed arm and rested her cheek on her hand as she stared at me intently.

I’d been thinking the same thing the whole time, but it stabbed at my heart when I heard it from someone else. Satsuki-san’s eyes were like a mirror that exposed in broad daylight who I was, deep down.

“You’re plain, always obsessed with what other people are thinking, and your grades, athletic performance, face, and figure are completely mediocre,” Satsuki-san listed. “It’s not even like you come from a particularly great background or were born with anything special.”

Damn, she was frank. This had to have been what Satsuki-san had thought of me the whole time. She’d let me hang out in the same friend group, but I guess that didn’t mean she had ever accepted me as one of them.

“Yeah,” I said. Actually, if anything, this felt like a relief. “I know.” Yeah, she was right. Mai and Ajisai-san were super kind, whereas Satsuki-san was being normal about this, right? Because, real talk, I’d stuck out like a sore thumb from the beginning.

Satsuki-san frowned at me, annoyed that I was agreeing with her. “With Mai’s credentials, she could have had her pick of any better partner. She could have picked anyone she liked from among her celebrity friends. Or, if she wanted to go for another classmate, there are people like Sena Ajisai.”

“Or you?” I offered.

“…Why did you mention my name?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry.”

Looked like I’d stumbled across a land mine.

Satsuki-san took a step towards me. She thrust her strong words into my neck where they stung like needles.

“Do you know what I think?” she said. “I have no idea what goes on in her mind, but she is my friend, and I respect her. I’ve seen her more closely than anyone else, and I can tell that she works surprisingly

hard."

I remained silent.

"So when I found out that she's dating such a dull person, I was disappointed, and I wanted to ask her why. So, I did. I asked her, 'Why Amaori?' And she said—"

For some reason, I felt like I knew exactly what Mai had said. She must have smiled, a grin as gentle as a spring breeze and answered—

"Because I felt like it was my destiny."

Mai had said it herself. We weren't destined to meet anyone, but the fact that we *had* met was destiny.

Satsuki-san stood before me in that imposing way, just as incredibly daunting as ever, but all the same, I wanted to speak.

"Actually," I said, "I used to think the same thing. I swore hands down that Mai and I were not a good match." It was an easy enough thing to assert.

"I know," Satsuki-san said.

Startled by the lack of any other response, I went, "Huh?"

"I'm no fool," she said, "so I gathered that much from our interactions. You know your own limitations, because you're a turtle who shrinks down to hide in your shell. Never mind the fact that no one would ever try to devour *you*."

Actually, I felt like I was on the verge of being devoured right then, but I wasn't going to tell Satsuki-san that.

Frightened, I asked, "Hey, uh, does it really bother you that much? Me and Mai being together, I mean."

She pulled an exasperated face. "…What do you mean, 'really'?" What, was I wrong?!

"My feelings have nothing to do with your relationship," she said. "I don't have the time to go sticking my nose into other people's love lives. But it's worth having Mai around, so to date her half-heartedly and then hurt her, of course that's going to upset me."

Still, she continued, "You wouldn't be capable of that, though. You're not that devious."

"Satsuki-san, you know me so well…" I said. Was she the type

who counted people-watching as a hobby?

"I wouldn't go that far," she said.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?! You're freaky!"

But also, little by little, I felt like I was starting to get a good picture of Satsuki-san. She was tall, gorgeous, and stern-looking, so she seemed unapproachable at first—and she was, mind you…but she still cared.

"…Hey, Satsuki-san, are you not that mad at me after all?"

"I'm irritated," she insisted. "I lost good study and sleep time for this pointless gossip about her love life."

"So is this all just your way of venting?"

"Half of it is venting. You're starting to get it, aren't you?"

Yeah, I was finally starting to understand how I should feel. She wasn't about to push me off the roof or anything. Maybe I could join my friend in her griping. In that case…I figured I'd ask her.

"But," I said. "I just don't get it. What I want Mai and me to be, what I want to do with Mai—I don't get it, and in the end, I think I've hurt her with my wishy-washy feelings."

"Well, that's a you problem," Satsuki-san said. "What a fool you are…or rather, that's what I'd tell you if I could."

She looked away from me, as if I'd stabbed her where it hurt.

"…I know how you feel," she admitted. "We all have moments when we don't even understand ourselves."

"Even you, Satsuki-san?"

"Of course. I'm only in my first year of high school, after all." Well, that was certainly an objective way of looking at it…

"Satsuki-san," I confessed, "you always look so sharp that I thought you had perfect control of yourself, head to toe."

"That would be ideal," she said, "but I'm only human. I'm not Oduka Mai."

"Uh, she's only human too?"

"No, she's her own species: *the* Oduka Mai."

Talk about déjà vu… I felt like I used to think the same thing.

Even though she looked so stern, I suddenly felt really connected to Satsuki-san. Maybe she and I had been feeling the same way all along—when it came to Mai, at least. I was just an average Joe, but Satsuki-san was in the position of average, strongest, closest friend Joe. At any rate, if Satsuki-san said that Mai was her friend, then that meant we weren't enemies for sure. And that meant—

"Hey, Satsuki-san," I said. "I think you deserve an apology."

"Whatever for?" she asked.

"I hurt a friend that you really care about."

"Hmph," she said. She was frowning, but it wasn't that same kind of sullen frown from earlier. It felt like she was trying to hide her own embarrassment.

"I need to apologize to Mai too," I continued. "I need to say sorry for hitting her. I don't know if she'll forgive me, but…if she does, then I'd like to patch things up with her."

"…I see."

"Satsuki-san, if you know where she is, can you tell me?"

Satsuki-san held down her hair against the blowing wind. She no longer gave off such a witchy impression like she had when it was cloudy earlier. The girl standing right in front of me was unmistakably Satsuki-san, who'd been my friend for two months.

"You've changed, Amaori," she said.

"Y-you think?"

"You used to be more self-deprecating," she said. "That isn't a bad thing, per se, but now you remind me a bit more of Mai. It's the 'being pushy about something you want' attitude."

"Wait, no! Gross!" I yelled, an accidentally sincere burst of honesty.

Then Satsuki-san smiled. It was the first time I'd ever seen her smile like that, a grin full of latent schadenfreude because I was flustered.

"Relax," she said. "You're the same as you always are when you're with the whole friend group. To be frank, I never expected that our talk would go like this. I assumed that I'd just monologue at you, and then you'd burst into tears. Then there'd be nothing left but for our friend

group to collapse, and it'd all be over for us."

"I see…" Wait, so she'd come to me ready to deal with that tragic outcome? Huh? Didn't that mean that she wanted to tell me off for the crime of hurting Mai? Because Mai was sad, she'd planned to ask me why I'd made her that way, and if she didn't like the answer, she was going to chastise me for it. Right?

"Hey, Satsuki-san, you *really* like Mai, don't you?!" I cried.

Satsuki-san didn't answer me. "Sorry," I said, hanging my head. For some reason, I just felt like that warranted an apology.

"I don't know where she went off to now," Satsuki-san said, "but I do know what she's up to."

"And what's that?"

For a moment, Satsuki-san hesitated. Whatever she had to say must have been pretty tough to get out, I figured.

"You see, she…" Satsuki-san began. Her mouth creaked open, heavy as the gates of hell.

"Once she had finished talking to me, she asked me to *'comfort'* her."

"…Huh?!" I said.

"Yeah…"

"Yeah" didn't cut it.

"'I hurt Renako,' is what she said," explained Satsuki-san. "'I want to know what it feels like to be in the arms of someone I don't like. So Satsuki, because I don't like you one bit, I want you to *comfort* me. Besides, you like me, don't you?'"

Satsuki-san must have been reciting every word from memory.

"And then?" I prompted.

"And never mind how much of a fool she's made of me before, I told her that this was her first time making a complete ass of me. I kicked her out of the house at half past five this morning."

God, I really wanted to ask. What exactly did Satsuki-san think about Mai? I really, really wanted to ask. But I had a pretty bad feeling

that question would get me chucked off the roof, and without Mai around, there was no guarantee I'd land in the tree again. I couldn't trade my life to satisfy my curiosity…

"Good job," I told her. I couldn't help but appreciate her hard work.

Also, wait, why on earth did I feel so relieved that Satsuki-san didn't actually go through with it? Who knew? Not me!

"To tell you the truth," Satsuki-san admitted, "I wonder if I would have derived some satisfaction from devouring her after all…hurting her, wearing her mind and body to ribbons. What do you think, Amaori?"

"There's no point in asking *me* that…"

"It's hard to fully understand yourself, isn't it…?"

"You're telling me," I said. Wait, this wasn't something to be sympathetic about. "Anyway, so about Mai."

"Right," she said. "Don't you think she's out finding someone to fulfill her desire?"

"No way," I breathed. I was aghast. That meant that right now, right as we spoke, Mai might have been in someone else's arms. "W-why didn't you try and stop her, Satsuki-san?!" I grabbed Satsuki-san's arm.

"Because that fool is at such a level of foolishness," Satsuki-san said, "that she's beyond anyone's help, don't you think?"

As I stood there in shock, she shook me off her arm. *Wait… Satsuki-san, was your arm trembling just now?* I thought.

"At any rate," Satsuki-san said, "considering that she's egotistical enough to refuse the advice of her friends, why not let her sink to rock bottom for once? …Besides, she's not picking up her calls, nor is she responding to any messages."

Seeing how tense Satsuki-san looked, I shut my mouth. She must have regretted not stopping Mai. Half of what she'd spat at me was just venting her frustration—so what about the other half? …Was it a request for me to go and stop Mai?

"All right," I said. "I get what you mean." We couldn't even figure out our own feelings. Maybe that was true, and if it was, well—

“Satsuki-san,” I told her, “I’m going to go stop Mai because I want to. It’s my own decision.”

“…All right,” she said. “It definitely is your own decision. But are you sure? Didn’t she hurt you?”

“Well, yeah. I guess.” Not only had she forced herself on me in my room, but then my sister had witnessed the whole debacle…

But still. My reply was straightforward. “That’s just what being friends is about,” I told her with a smile. “You hurt them, and they hurt you right back, you know?”

Yeah. That was my image of a perfect best friend.

Satsuki-san didn’t look happy or upset but instead closed her eyes. “She’s selfish,” she reminded me, “and she doesn’t listen to a thing anyone else says.”

Yeah, maybe. I had gotten the crap kissed out of me against my will, after all. So—

“Next time she tries to get her way,” I promised, “I’ll stop her by slapping her again.”

Satsuki-san opened her eyes wide.

“I see,” she said. “In that case, maybe things will turn out all right.”

As I turned to go, she called out “Amaori!” one more time.

“I don’t know where that fool’s gone off to,” Satsuki-san said, “but take care of her, won’t you? Do her a favor and tell her she’s not as big of a hotshot as she thinks she is.”

“You got it.” I grinned and flashed Satsuki-san a peace sign. “I’ll be sure to pass along the message! Thanks!”

Then I ran, dashing indoors and thundering down the stairs. From an outsider’s perspective, this probably looked like something out of a teen flick, but in actuality, I was just hell-bent on catching Mai in the depths of her desperation. Still, considering that this was Mai we were talking about, I figured catching her would be one heck of a fiasco. After all, she was the queen of love at Ashigaya High, whom no one had ever managed to pin down.

For lack of a better idea, I figured I could head back to class and determine where to go from there. I didn’t have the faintest idea of

Mai's usual stomping grounds.

Ajisai-san was the only one left in the classroom. It was rare to see her without anyone else around. "Oh, Rena-chan," she said when I came in. "Welcome back."

"Oh, yeah, thanks," I said. "What's up? Do you have detention or something?"

"No, not at all. Everyone else went home already, but you left your bag here, so I decided to hang back."

"Huh?" I said. "Ajisai-san, you were waiting for me?"

Waiting for *me*?! And it wasn't even my birthday!

Bag in hand, Ajisai-san leaned over to me. "Hey, how does today sound for hanging out?" she asked. "Mai-chan's absent, so want to come over to my place like we talked about the other day?"

"Huh? Can I?!" I cried. An angel had just invited me to her holy abode! This meant that Ajisai-san and I were fully best friends… This single moment was my reward for my entire life up until now. No longer was I the girl who'd stared at the lives of her elementary school friends on social media and felt a sense of impending doom! Now I was a perfect outgoing normie, a social butterfly who'd made a full break from her social chrysalis, Amaori Renako!

As trumpets fanfared in the distance, I staggered my way over to Ajisai-san and—stopped dead. Mai's forlorn expression pulled me back. That "Okay. I'm sorry," she'd said doused me like a cold shower. What if, even now, she was still feeling like that and was off somewhere with a complete stranger?

"A-actually, sorry, Ajisai-san. I, uh," I began to stammer.

"Oh, are you busy?" she asked.

"Um, well…" My knees started to buckle. Ajisai-san's expression was so open that I couldn't meet her eyes. That was right. I had to turn her down. I had Mai to go looking for, after all. And I was the only one who could stop her.

But at the same time, holy shit. My head reeled. I'd gotten dizzy just from turning down the guys, and now this was the archangel Ajisai-san I was dealing with. She was the one person I absolutely could not stand hating me.

“I’d like to go,” I started, “but…” I forced myself to smile and quietly shook my head.

“Rena-chan?” she asked.

Urgh. My heart ached. I wasn’t over my trauma at all! I wanted to cower immediately and keel right over, but if I did that, then I wouldn’t be able to find Mai.

So I…managed to lift my head. The world spun around me, and Ajisai-san, worried, said, “Are you okay? You don’t look so hot again…”

“Urrrgh,” I groaned. “I’m sorry. Maybe, uh, maybe another day.”

“Rena-chan, are you crying?!”

I was, but I hadn’t even noticed. I needed all my focus to break free of angelic Ajisai-san’s heavenly allure.

“I see,” she said. “You have stuff to do, huh?”

My head throbbed at the disappointment in her voice. But, well, I did.

But wasn’t the reason why I couldn’t just turn her down outright because I didn’t trust her? It was the same worry, this memory that had weighed me down since junior high and would continue to do so forever. The worry that Ajisai-san was going to start giving me the cold shoulder after this. But no, no way. Ajisai-san may have been selfish and short-tempered, but she wasn’t the kind of person who’d do that. That image I had of the naughty, seductive fallen angel Ajisai-san was just in my head!

I needed to tell her exactly how I felt—just how much I dearly wanted to spend time with her! I remembered what Mai did. Back at my house, she’d hugged me in order to get her feelings across.

Therefore, in order to tell Ajisai-san my feelings that words couldn’t convey, I wiped away my tears, and, just like she did for her little brothers, grabbed her hand.

“Hey, you know what?” I began.

“Huh? Wh-what?” she spluttered.

Her hand in mine, I declared, “Ajisai-san, I like you… I really like you a lot!”

“Huh?” she cried. Her face was super close to mine and turning as red as an apple.

“So I’m sorry,” I told her. “I’m really, really sorry! I do want to be with you, it’s just that now’s not the right time!”

“R-Rena-chan…?”

Still clutching her hand, I pressed closer. Almost as if I was saying farewell to this world. Telling her my feelings before I went.

I looked straight at her and pleaded, “Please, Ajisai-san, please understand. I absolutely do want to go home with you…and, Ajisai-san, I really like you so much!”

“H-huh?!”

“I promise that I really do want to be with you every single day! Because I like you so much! There’s just one important thing I have to do first…so I’m sorry! I swear I’ll make it up to you. Because, Ajisai-san, you mean so much to me!”

Thank goodness there was no one else left in the classroom. I didn’t think I’d have been able to get all my honest feelings off my chest otherwise.

“Ajisai-san,” I continued, “ever since we became friends, I’ve been thinking nonstop about how cute you are. And when we hung out the other day, I had so much fun. You’re my angel, so…I swear, I’ll keep liking you forever!”

I battered Ajisai-san’s tiny frame with my whole heart. Because I’d learned from Mai that even a self-centered attraction that didn’t take the other person’s feelings even remotely into consideration still had the power to move someone’s heart.

Ajisai-san’s eyes clouded over with tears, and she gave me a tiny nod. “O-okay…” she said. “I, um, I like you too…?”

We were so close our noses almost bumped together. There, alone in that deserted classroom, Ajisai-san quietly closed her eyes. She pushed out her lips ever so slightly, those new summer lipstick covered lips…

…Wait, what was going on? At a loss of what to do, I went, “Uh,” and Ajisai-san’s eyes snapped open. Forget how pale she normally was; Ajisai-san flushed red to her ears.

“Huh?” she said. “Uh, huh, R-Rena-chan?”

“Uh,” I went. “Well…anyway, yeah, so that’s why I can’t hang out today.”

Ajisai-san seemed uncharacteristically flustered. I guess she’d never expected to get an invitation turned down by the likes of me, and that was shocking enough to make her panic.

No, it was fine. After all, I’d explained myself properly to her. She wouldn’t start giving me the cold shoulder after this. Yup, I just had to trust her.

“So why don’t you try asking Satsuki-san or Kaho-chan today?” I offered.

“Y-y-yeah, good idea,” she said. “Because you’re busy! Right… Right.”

When I let go of her hand, she yanked out her compact and started working away at fixing her hair. Oh, Ajisai-san. Kudos to her for always trying to look cute.

“Oh, but Kaho-chan said she was busy too,” Ajisai-san added.

“What, does she have work?”

“No, she said she was going to Akasaka. Someone invited her to this luxury hotel thing, apparently.”

What on earth? Who would invite Kaho-chan to…

“Hm?” I said. “Wait a sec. Is that…?”

And then it hit me. I scrabbled through my bag, found my wallet, and yanked out the membership card Mai had taken it upon herself to get for me. I flipped it over to the back.

“It’s in Akasaka!” I cried.

This had to be it. That had to be where Mai was—at that hotel pool she’d taken me to that one time!

“Thanks, Ajisai-san!” I grabbed her hand once more.

Bewildered, she grabbed back. “Huh? Y-yeah, sure.” A bashful smile grew on her reddened cheeks. “I don’t have the faintest idea what’s going on,” she admitted, “but good luck, Rena-chan.”

“Thanks! I’ll do my best!”

“When it’s all over,” she said, “well, uh, would you like to come over after all? Oh, uh, or maybe it’d be better if, you know, um, you come over on a day when my brothers aren’t home, maybe…?”

“Huh?”

“No, never mind! I-I was wrong! That wouldn’t be a good idea!”

She waved both hands frantically in a way that was so cute it made me want to hug her right then and there. But alas. Heartbroken, I instead said my farewells to Ajisai-san.

“See you tomorrow!” I said.

“Uh-huh. See you later.”

I’d turned down her invitation, and yet my heart felt light. Ajisai-

san must have saved me from my trauma. She really was an angel guiding this lost lamb.

Still, for some reason I felt like I had just committed a mistake that could never be undone. Why was that, I wondered? It was like I'd let a once-in-a-lifetime chance slip through my fingers… Oh, I didn't know! Dammit, Mai! It was all her fault I couldn't hang out with Ajisai-san! Everything was her fault! Right from the start!

Mai had asked Satsuki-san if she liked her. Satsuki-san ultimately ended up refusing her, so I figured Mai must have chosen a more certain target next—someone that she herself didn't have any feelings for but who did like her. Satsuki-san mentioned once before that Kaho-chan had professed her feelings to Mai, so that made her the perfect candidate. I felt ever so slightly relieved that she'd chosen a girl and someone I actually knew…but all the same, I didn't want her getting with Kaho-chan, so I absolutely had to put a stop to this. It wasn't like Mai was gonna bleed out and die if I didn't hurry, but still…I didn't want her getting with Kaho-chan!

On the train over, I kept trying to get in touch with Mai or Kaho-chan, but neither one of them responded to me. I arrived at the hotel with my nerves frazzled, and there I found—

"What the?" I said. The lobby was packed with kids from Ashigaya High School. "What the heck?!" How many people were even in there? It wasn't like just ten or twenty people; there was maybe a whole class's worth. Seeing all those teens in uniforms milling around the swanky hotel made me feel like they were all on a field trip. It was hella bizarre.

Also, it wasn't an equal mix of boys and girls. The boys vastly outnumbered the girls with a maybe four to one ratio. All the grades were represented too, from first years to third years. Everyone was equipped with an envelope and a nervous expression.

Just then, I saw a familiar face in the throng and pointed to it. "Kaho-chan!" I cried. "There you are!"

"Huh?" she said. "Wait, Rena-chin, even you're here?"

"What do you mean 'even' I'm here? And what's everyone doing here in the first place?"

She jolted in surprise when I shoved my way through the crowd to get to her. “Wait, you didn’t know, and you just showed up here anyway? What kind of coincidence is that?!”

“I wouldn’t call it a coincidence,” I said. “Anyway, can I see that envelope for a minute?”

I borrowed hers, opened it, and found the following inside:

Dear Koyanagi Kaho-sama,

Although we have faced a long spell of rain and yearn to feel the sun's rays once more, I do hope that my letter finds you well.

I am presently embarking on a new endeavor. If I may receive a tad more of your assistance, which you have thus far been so kind as to grant me, I would like to inform you that I am hosting a party in order to search for a romantic partner. I understand that you are terribly busy, but I would be ever so grateful if you could attend.

Yours,

Writing to you on this most auspicious day in June

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Yours,

Mai Oduka

Writing to you on this most auspicious day in June

"What the heck is this?" I asked.

Kaho-chan poked my shoulder, and I looked up. There in front of the escalator stood a signboard with the words "Oduka Mai's Lover Recruitment Party" written on it in an elegant hand.

I had to read it twice. "What the…heck is that?" I said.

"In a word, it's an audition!" Kaho explained.

"I think I've seen something like this before on a romance reality TV show…"

Wait, so did Mai send all these Ashigaya students invitations so that they could become her partner? Oh, that must have been why Ajisai-san was alone in the classroom! No, wait. Now that I looked closer, I realized that it wasn't just students who were clutching invitations. Some people who had them looked more like ordinary hotel guests…and wait, there was even a random old man with one!

"What, did Mai invite everyone who's ever told her that they have a crush on her?" I asked.

"Yup, sure seems like it!" Kaho-chan said, balling her hands into excited fists. She didn't notice that I'd accidentally just said Mai's name without an honorific. "Mai's super popular like that. Isn't it cool?"

The scale of the whole thing was throwing me for a loop. What on

earth was she doing renting out a whole hotel ballroom and pulling something like this? I mean, she was just in her first year of high school, for Pete's sake…

But I did get it. With so many people to choose from, Mai could definitely find what she wanted. Satsuki-san had turned her down, so the next step was pulling out all the stops with a huge crowd of people, right? Wait, so after Satsuki-san kicked her out at half past five, did Mai seriously manage to make all these invitations and send them out to everyone? She was seriously something else…

"Kaho-chan," I said, "when you look at all of this, do you really still want to date her?"

The innocent cutie of Ashigaya High School didn't give it a moment's thought before nodding. "Yup!" she said. "'Cause Mai's rich! And famous! And pretty, right?"

Ah, so this was pure greed. Was Kaho-chan really so conniving? And was that all everyone was here for?

"I'm sorry, Kaho-chan," I said. "I know you're looking forward to this party, but I'm going to do whatever it takes to shut it down."

"What?!"

Mai must have been somewhere in the hotel already. As I made to go search for the supadari, Kaho-chan grabbed my arm.

"What's your problem?" she cried. "No, no, no!"

"Hey, stop!" Kaho-chan was small and light, but unlike me, she was athletic, muscular for her size, and pretty strong. Wait, was Kaho-chan, of all people, really going to stop me here?!

"Kaho-chan," I pleaded, "do you really want to be with someone who puts up a signboard like that?"

"It's called having a sense of humor!" she snapped.

"She's an airhead!"

"And she's cute because of it! Since she's got the looks and personality and fortune!"

"Urgh!" It was no use. The muscles of a former shut-in couldn't possibly tear Kaho-chan off of me. This left me with no other choice. I'd simply have to make do with my sub-par communication skills!

"Hey, Kaho-chan, listen to me," I said.

“No! I won’t!” she whined.

“This is an audition, right? She can only choose one person out of everyone here to date her. How many people are here? Dozens? Like, a hundred? Do you really believe that, out of everyone, she’ll choose you?”

“Maybe she’ll choose all of us!” Kaho-chan suggested.

“Isn’t that the worst possible outcome?” That went beyond two-timing at that point.

I clapped my hands to her cheeks and looked deep into her eyes. “Listen to me!” I pleaded. “Give some serious thought to which one is better! Her only being able to choose one person or this party getting canceled!”

“H-huh?” she said.

“If this party is canceled, then, naturally, that leaves Mai free. Since you’re in her friend group already, doesn’t that then give you an overwhelming advantage?”

“Oh!” she said. “You’re right!” Stars glittered in her eyes.

“Now you get what I mean, right?” I said. “Great! And I’m sure this is better for Mai too!”

As I released her, Kaho-chan started scrutinizing me. “Wh-what is it?” I asked.

“Still,” she said, “I can’t just let you have it that easily. Can I ask you a question, Rena-chin?”

“I mean, sure…”

Kaho-chan half closed her eyes, smirked, and leveled an appraising glance at me. “I’ve been thinking this for a while now, actually.”

“Urp,” I said. Satsuki-san’s “Why Amaori?” rang through my head. If Kaho-chan was wondering why I was in the friend group, I didn’t think I could recover from the blow.

However, she just peered at my face and said, “Rena-chin, you like Mai too, don’t you?”

“Huh?” I yelped. A question from that direction was the last thing I was expecting. My eyes opened wide. I made a big X with my arms and then yelled, loud enough for it to echo around the lobby, “As if!

Me, like a girl who'd host this kind of party? No way! No freaking way!"

Kaho-chan seemed satisfied with my response. She burst into laughter for quite some time and then patted my shoulder. "*Got* it!" she chirped. "In that case, you're my rival, now aren'tcha? Let's do our best from now on, Rena-chin!"

As she waved and dashed away, I shouted at her retreating figure, "I don't have a clue what you mean! How? How on earth did you come to that conclusion?"

But all she did was look back and give me a thumbs-up and a grin that stretched from ear to ear. I-I refused to accept this!

Oduka Mai, clad in a swimsuit, reclined against her armrest. There was an odd sensuality in her relaxed expression, and with her long legs folded across each other, she was the image of elegance. Her hair was tied back into one thick stream that ran down the back of her neck like the Milky Way.

She glanced up at the clock on the wall of the café and said, "I suppose it must be just about time to begin."

A small sigh escaped her thinly parted lips. "I'm so sorry, Renako," she said. "This is the only way I have to make up for all the ways I've wronged you, but I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me anyway."

Her amethyst eyes stared far off into the distance, harboring a determination as clear as water.

And then—

I yelled, "Then come apologize to me!" with a scream that shattered the whole high-society atmosphere this place had going on.

"Hm?" She lifted her head and finally saw me.

I stood with my hands covering my chest and my face bright red. Yup, I'd been standing there for a couple minutes now, but she hadn't noticed me at all.

"…Renako?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you! I searched and searched and finally found you here."

"And what's with those clothes?"

“W-well… I didn’t have a choice! When I showed them my membership card, they said I couldn’t go into the pool alone with a uniform on!”

I was wearing an audacious striped bikini. I was in a rush, so I asked them to give me something appropriate, only to have this gaudy thing handed over… But turning people down just wasn’t my cup of tea.

“I see,” she said. “It suits you. I should take a photo to have on hand for later. Oh, where did I leave my phone?”

“I don’t know, you big dummy! Probably in a locker or something! Never mind that I’ve been blowing up your phone trying to get a hold of you!”

Mai smiled at me ever so slightly in an otherwise sorrowful expression. “I knew it,” she said. “You’re mad, aren’t you?”

“Gee, you think?! Because of all the work it took to find you!”

Oh, crap. At this rate, we wouldn’t get into anything I wanted to talk about. *Let’s cool down a bit,* I thought. Finding Mai made me so angry, my energy shot through the roof. And now other people were staring at me…

I sat down opposite Mai. “Satsuki-san told me about this morning,” I said.

Mai’s eyebrows knitted together. “How much of it?” she asked.

“All of it.”

“…I see… I’m surprised she’s such a blabbermouth.”

Mai fell silent. I could see that she was searching for words but felt like she couldn’t reach out to anyone.

Now it was my turn to sigh. “…Hey, Mai,” I said. “Stop doing this.”

“I refuse.”

She recrossed her long legs and looked straight at me. It was that special glare of hers that I was weak against, the one with enough strength to overpower this introvert.

“I hurt you,” she said.

“B-but that doesn’t mean you have to be punished,” I said. “I’m telling you, it’s fine, so knock it off already… And I’m sorry for slapping

you on the cheek too."

Good, good, good. I felt relieved that I'd pulled off apologizing to her face-to-face, but Mai just turned away in silence. Th-this freaking girl! What, was she a little kid or something?

"Besides," I said, "if you start dating someone as a punishment, it's not fair to them either, is it? You should go date the person you actually like…"

"I can no longer date the person I like."

"Because they're…" Me.

Mai's voice was so chilly it shocked me. Maybe I had just selfishly assumed that, so long as I found her, everything would work out okay.

"So I have no choice but to find someone else I actually like, don't I?" Mai said. "Are you telling me that you want to rob me of even that one hope?"

A lump formed in my throat. "Mai…" I said.

Suddenly, I recalled something she'd said: *I hope you can understand how painful it'd be for me if I had to continue being friendly to someone who'd turned me down.* Then, for the first time, I realized maybe just how badly—more than I'd thought—I'd hurt her.

Mai put a hand to her temple and then said in a very calm voice, "Therefore, we are over, Renako. Thank you. We had a fun time together. Finally, as my good friend, I hope you'll wish me better luck in my next love affair."

Mai's hair was *tied back today.* This was the personification of obstinacy known as Oduka Mai, with the strength to prevent anyone from getting near her. To Mai, this was the level of distance that being friends required.

"I likewise wish for your happiness with all my heart. Don't hesitate to come talk to me if you ever have any troubles. I'll always be there for the person I once sincerely loved, even if it requires me flying halfway around the globe to do so."

"Wait," I said. "But what about our competition?"

"We both lost," she said. Her eyes swam. "From now on, you and I are nothing more than friends." I heard her unspoken words: *You and I are nothing more than strangers.*

I extended my hand to her, and Mai instinctively looked back at me. “Renako,” she began.

I cut her off. “No.” I reached out and undid Mai’s hair. There was a gleam of fluttering gold. Her hair shone in the light reflected off the water as it came free.

“…Renako?” she asked.

“It’s not over yet,” I told her. “Don’t just decide that on your own.”

She looked up, and our eyes finally met.

Believe me, I was already plenty aware that Mai was a handful, but still, I was the kind of girl who could do what needed to be done when push came to shove. After all, if I weren’t, then I wouldn’t have been fit to be Mai’s best friend.

“Satsuki-san told me that you’re not as big of a hotshot as you think you are. And I agree,” I told her.

“Maybe so,” she said, “but I still try my best to act like it. I don’t appreciate Satsuki-san looking down on me.”

“Says the girl who couldn’t curb her own horniness,” I pointed out.

The look in Mai’s eyes changed. She gritted her teeth and groaned like I’d just shot her in a vital area. “That’s why I’m doing this, so that I’ll never hurt you again! So I won’t mess up again! That’s why I—”

Then, for the first time, I initiated my very own kiss with Mai. It only lasted a moment, a mere brush against her lips.

There were other hotel guests around, so I had no clue what on earth had possessed me to do that. But Mai turned rigid.

“Why I… resolved to give you up…” she finished.

I watched as the reflection of myself in her wide-open eyes smiled stiffly. I wished I could have made it prettier, more like the way Mai always smiled, but I just couldn’t pull it off. Still, I had to make sure she understood my feelings.

“Listen,” I said. “It’s okay to mess up as much as you want. I already told you, no matter how many mistakes you make, I’ll always accept you for who you are… But you’re not the only one who has trouble believing that, huh?”

“But…” Mai whimpered. The tone of her voice was so helpless. It struck me as kind of hilarious that all it took was a kiss to make the supadari go so meek.

“I do nothing but make mistakes all day long, every single day,” I told her.

“But when I go to bed at night, it keeps replaying in my head over and over again,” she said. “That moment when you struck my cheek.”

“I mentioned that already too,” I reminded her. “Trying to go to sleep is one big shame-fest. I deal with that every night.”

I pressed my forehead to hers. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I should have said something sooner. It wasn’t fair of me, so I want to apologize. This is my fault too.”

“Should have said something sooner about what?”

Ugh, this was embarrassing. “To tell you the truth,” I admitted, “I’ve got quite a lot of feelings for you too.”

“…What sort of feelings?” she asked.

I would never have spelled it out for her if Mai was her usual self. But for today, I guess I had no other option. Besides, she looked too weak at the moment to tease me about it.

“Ever since you kissed me…I’ve started thinking about you in a romantic way,” I admitted.

I snuck a peek at Mai, and her face was bright red.

“Really? Really now?” she asked. “But I thought you hated me. Isn’t that why you slapped me?”

“That’s because you went too far… There’s a time and place for everything, and I wish you were more aware of that.”

“I can’t possibly believe you.” Mai hid her face in her hands. “I’ve already gone and ruined everything beyond repair.”

“Come on, it was just one fight…”

Mai’s beautiful voice wobbled. “I need more,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I need you to tell me more so that I can really believe you.”

“Aw, what?” I groaned. “But that’s embarrassing.”

Mai locked eyes with me. Her stare was pathetic, like she was clinging to me. N-no fair.

"…Okay, fine, Mai. I get it," I groaned. I couldn't say no, not when she looked at me like that. Jeez! Fine.

"From the very start," I admitted, "I thought you were so freaking gorgeous that it shocked me. And then back when you hugged me at my house, I remember wondering if maybe you really did just like me after all."

I looked back on all the events of this past month, this June when we had been best friends and lovers too. "Then we went to Odaiba and had a ton of fun, and after that, there was that whole hotel thing… You know, when you did *that* to me. Well, of course it made me start thinking about you romantically. It was my first time ever doing something like that, and my heart started pounding like crazy whenever I thought about you afterward."

Why on earth were we having this conversation in swimsuits? I was so mortified, I couldn't look Mai in the eyes.

"Then, what with the time we spent together before your trip overseas and when you came home early just to see me, I guess I could say that you made me happy… Yeah, you did. You made me happy."

My body felt so hot it might combust. "So when you pushed me down in my room," I continued, "I guess I was actually kinda willing to go along with it… It's probably because I didn't mind it that much, even though I was getting swept along in it, that I was so wishy-washy in accepting you and hurt the both of us." Because I'd been hiding all these feelings of attraction.

"I'm sorry, Mai," I said. "I do like you…I like you a lot."

The weight of my own words made me shiver. It was the first time I'd ever said anything to her not as her best friend but as her girlfriend.

"Um… I think this is about all I can manage, so is that good?" I asked. Timidly, I raised my head to get a peek at her reaction. But Mai was still looking down into her lap.

"Renako," she said. "I didn't know I hurt you that badly."

Was that the only thing she'd heard?!

"Oh, for crying out loud!" I groaned. *Cut it out already!*

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. “You know what, Mai?” I said. “I may not be like you. I may not be able to save someone from jumping off the roof or be able to fly through the air.”

“Pardon?”

“But I can still get caught in the rain with you, get drenched with you, go diving with you. This isn’t a one-way street of protecting or being protected. This is what you call being lovers, and what *I* call being best friends!”

I pulled her by the hand all the way to the edge of the pool.

“So long as you’re Oduka Mai, I’m Amaori Renako!”

And with that declaration, she and I leapt into the pool. There was a huge splash as we sunk into the water. Mai’s hair billowed everywhere like down dancing in the wind. She opened her eyes underwater and stared at me in shock. Here, no one could see us, and I had no need to be ashamed. So I stroked her cheek and went in for a kiss.

There in that weightless cerulean world, our lips met for several moments. Mai’s hands wrapped around my back, and as we held one another, the two of us became as one.

Our heads broke the surface of the water. Now I could speak again, but I knew that there was no longer a need to say anything more.

"I got my feelings across…right, Mai?" I asked as I pulled my hair out of my face.

Mai nodded once more. "Yes," she said.

As if in defiance of the cool water around us, Mai's body was on fire. Her damp hair clung to her like a magnificent golden dress.

Mai laid her head on my chest. "You did get your feelings across," she said. "Thank you, really."

"Good," I said. "I'm glad."

…She could probably hear my heartbeat like this. *Ugh, how embarrassing.* And good grief, this girl really was a piece of work.

"You're really high-maintenance, Mai," I told her.

She giggled. "Yes, maybe so," she said. "That's what I call being lovers and what you call being best friends."

"Well, maybe."

Pretty sure best friends didn't kiss each other like that, though!

Then Mai covered my face with her hands so that I couldn't see anything. "Hey, what the heck?" I asked.

"I'm Oduka Mai," she said. *Uh, yeah, and that's news how?*

"I can't have you see me cry," she continued. "So please let me stay like this for a moment."

"Uh… I mean, I don't care, but okay…" I said.

What kind of made-up rule was this…? This girl really *was* a piece of work. Oh well, there wasn't anything I could do about it. After all, I was the one who'd gone and caught feelings for her.

"Say, Renako," she said.

"What now?"

"You said earlier that you spend every night remembering those awful moments?"

"Yeah," I said.

"All of you people who aren't me are just incredible…" she breathed. "Imagine going through that night after night and still

persevering as well as you do."

"I mean, like, I wanted to die just a moment ago!"

Mai took her palm away, and a light came pouring in—a beautiful light that shone like the sun. It was Mai's glowing smile.

"That's what makes you so strong and kind, isn't it?" she asked.

"…Well, I don't know about that." I looked away. "That's a foul…"

She giggled. Oh, whatever… I'd let it slide. So long as Mai was back to her old cheerful self, right?

"After all," I pointed out, "this contest is still going on, even if we only have another week left."

"I know," she said. "Let's give it our best shot."

Mai rose from the pool, and I followed suit to sit down next to her. We were holding hands like girlfriends, but for today alone, I conceded that it felt nice to have her hand in mine. I couldn't keep myself from smiling either.

"You perked right back up the moment you realized you had a chance at winning," I pointed out. "That's pretty crafty of you."

"I'm just glad," she said. "Because my destined one came to rescue the princess."

No matter if she was spouting pompous crap like this or covering my face with her hands so I wouldn't see her crying, this was Mai, the girl that I liked. …Honestly, I still didn't really get whether or not we were dating or if I really loved her and everything. But whatever.

"Then this means we made up, right?" I said.

"Yes, we did. I hurt you. You slapped me. We both did wrong, so why not let this all be water under the bridge?"

"Sure thing." I smiled in relief. Thank goodness. For real—thank goodness.

Yet, just as I relaxed, I was suddenly hit by a new issue, one of practicality.

"Oh yeah!" I cried. "In this case, you don't need to have this party any more, right? What should we do with all those people? There's seriously a ton of them."

“I’ll explain the situation and send them on their way. I’ll say that there’s no need for them any longer now that I’m back in high spirits again.”

“That’s mean!”

Mai grinned, pleased with herself, in a way that was more Mai-ish than anyone else could manage. “What are you talking about?” she said. “I’m sure they’ll be glad. After all, I’m back to being happy again, and they all love me. Isn’t this just common sense?”

This freaking girl… You could search the whole world, but you really wouldn’t find anyone with more Mai-ness than her!

After she got out of the pool, Mai, at my urging, apologized (albeit reluctantly) before everyone. Then, for some unknown reason, she promised to sing a song by way of apology and put on a show with singing and guitar. Everyone got so hyped, it was like we were at a concert. Mai could sing like a pro.

I sighed in exasperation as I watched Kaho-chan, standing in the front row and waving one of the light sticks that had been passed around.

I muttered to myself, “What the hell is going on?”

Epilogue

A WHOLE BUNCH of stuff went down after that. For starters, I told Satsuki-san that Mai and I made up. When I added that Mai's chastity was still intact, all she said was, "Good." It was always a challenge to figure out what she felt about anything, given how curt and brusque she was, but I figured she must have been pretty relieved too.

But when I tried grinning at her and going, "Guess that means you really do like Mai after all, huh?" she whacked me with the corner of her book. I guess talking with Satsuki-san was gonna continue to be an uphill battle for me.

Kaho-chan still totally misunderstood my relationship with Mai, and I still hadn't managed to make it to Ajisai-san's house. Even now, Satsuki-san and Mai were embroiled in a cold war. By all appearances, our little five-person friend group was back to normal, but deep down we'd all been knocked topsy-turvy. But I realized then that all those smiling people on social media I saw while doomscrolling in bed were probably hiding a bunch of weird crap too. Satsuki-san and I had squabbled, Ajisai-san and I had become friends, Kaho-chan had gotten completely the wrong idea about me, and Mai and I had waged our big argument. Maybe, I thought, I'd finally gotten more out of high school than just frantically trying to keep up appearances. Maybe I'd finally really managed to turn over a new leaf for high school in the truest meaning of the phrase.

At any rate, it was finally the end of June. The day of reckoning for my final competition with Mai had arrived.

After Satsuki-san told me that, oddly enough, everyone had keys to the roof, Mai and I decided on a different location for this private conversation—namely, Mai's place.

She lived in this crazy-huge apartment complex that was as big as a freaking castle. Mai's family occupied the penthouse suite on the twenty-fifth floor, the very top of the building. It had that whole thing where a special elevator picks you up from the parking lot and deposits you directly in the room itself. It amused the heck out of me, but I

managed to pull a straight face.

"Holy shit," I said. And this girl had gone and sought *me* out? This had to be a practical joke, right? My inner Kaho-chan drummed up a fit in my head, yelling, "She's too good-looking! And too rich! I'm going to riot!"

"What's wrong?" Mai asked. "The parlor is this way."

"This is my first time ever seeing a place with an actual parlor…"

It was after school, and Mai, who'd come home before me, had already changed into her streetwear. She had this whole look going on with a silk shirt and skinny pants. Her hair was down and, of course, utterly gorgeous. She led me past a room that was so empty it might as well have been a dance floor and on into that parlor she'd mentioned. Oh god, there were even paintings on the walls and all these expensive-looking vases everywhere.

"I feel like I've been swallowed up in the belly of the Mai," I complained.

She laughed and rubbed her stomach. "Then that means we'll be together forever."

I couldn't help but shriek. "What, are you a psychopath?!"

The parlor had two enormous sofas and a table sandwiched between them. I went to take a seat across from Mai, but she led me by the hand to sit next to her.

"There's no need to treat this like some kind of business deal," she said. "You can sit next to me."

"W-well, yeah, but…" I couldn't keep calm when I was too close to her.

While one of her hands was busy holding mine, the other rested on top of my skirt and stroked my thigh. I wasn't a pet Siamese cat, you know!

"Hey, where's everyone else at anyway?" I asked.

"We have two servants, but they're both out at present. Maman won't be home today either. If you'd like, we could have the whole house to ourselves all night, just the two of us."

"Nope, I'm good! I'm going home the minute we're done talking!"

"Oh, you're no fun," she said.

Then she kissed the nape of my neck. *Eeep.*

"St-stop, stop! Don't jump the gun! We need to talk first!"

I yanked my hand out of Mai's grip and scooted a two hands' distance away from her.

Mai shrugged in defeat. "Very well," she said. "Then let's get down to business. Quite a lot has happened this past month."

"Y-you're telling me."

"We spent an equal amount of time as lovers and friends."

"You're so full of BS!" I cried. "After all the shit hit the fan, you kept your hair down the whole time, didn't you?"

"And we each still have plenty of things left on our lists," she went on.

"Yeah, I'll say! We spent way too little time as friends!" I snapped. "Hey, quit ignoring me!"

Some things (Mai) never changed. Or maybe, I felt, it was like she'd been getting more carried away by the minute ever since she'd learned that I had feelings for her. Even if it had been to cheer her up, I shouldn't have gone on about liking her so much. Oh well, too late to regret that now!

"All right," she said. "Then let's get to it." She extended her hand to me in encouragement. "Please let me hear your answer."

"…Right," I said.

It was finally here: the fateful day. Mai smiled, confident that she already knew what I'd pick. After all, her grin seemed to say, after she'd had her way with me and I'd kissed her, why would I feel the need to pick being best friends?

But I had no plan to lie to my own heart. I had faith in Mai, after all.

"You know," I said.

"Yes?"

"In the end… I still really don't know about this whole girlfriend thing," I admitted.

Mai's smile cracked. She stared at me in disbelief. "What on earth are you saying?" she asked. "And after you've already stolen my heart?

What are you, some sort of femme fatale?"

"Wait, no!" I stuck out both hands in protest. "Just to clarify, I haven't been messing around with you or anything."

"You say this, and yet you made me call off the party to search for another love interest…"

"Well, duh! But," I insisted, "if you ever had anyone you actually liked and wanted to date, then I would've supported you in that… Well, I probably would've."

Mai looked away and pouted. With a sigh, she said, "I can't believe you're saying that to me with such a provocative expression…"

"You're the one who's deciding to take it that way! It's not *my* fault!" Pretty much everything was Mai's fault, for that matter. "I still have things I want to do with you as friends, you know? Because you never tied your hair up!"

"Why not do those things as girlfriends?"

"No freaking way!"

"But why not?" she pressed.

"Because," I began. And then right there I ran out of steam.

"Because?" she prompted.

My face started turning red. Because if we were girlfriends, I knew I'd be so worried about Mai losing interest in me that…we probably wouldn't capture that same lighthearted vibe we had as friends, you know? Besides, if we were girlfriends, I'd get jealous whenever Mai spent any alone time with someone else, and I'd miss her so much on her long trips overseas that I'd probably cry. There'd be all kinds of big changes. I was still trying to get a hang of being a regular old high schooler, so there was no freaking way I could handle this yet. So—

"…I'd rather be best friends with you," I admitted.

Mai went silent. Her face looked like she'd accepted everything. "I see," she said. Her voice was the most unemotional I'd ever heard it.

She nodded, and I hung my head and mumbled shyly, "But…I do like you. And as your best friend, I want to let you do what you want… So…"

Mai blinked up at me. "So?"

“So… How about we be more than friends but not, like, full lovers? The best-friend zone? How does that sound?”

Even I knew that I was just spouting nonsense, so I raised my voice and barreled right on past that. “It’s just for now, until you find someone else you like! We’re like a best friend and girlfriend combo… Yeah, we can be *friends with Rena-fits* or something! How does that sound?”

“Friends with Rena-fits?” she repeated skeptically.

“You know, a whole new relationship type between Renako and Mai… That kind of thing…”

The resulting silence was deafening. I felt like I’d really botched that one.

“Well,” Mai finally said, stroking her chin. “As far as last-ditch efforts to not concede defeat go, not too shabby.”

“Urk!” *That’s fair.* I still didn’t have the self-confidence—or the confidence in general, really—to take the next step. Since revamping myself for high school, I’d had lots of time to improve myself, but one month really was too short of a time to make this leap. I wasn’t talented enough to handle such a drastic change.

Still, I was also aware that I’d done a pretty good job of things in the latest incident, what with chasing after Mai and patching things up with her. With that in mind, maybe… Maybe someday Mai and I could take the next step. Because maybe this thing Mai called being girlfriends sounded appealing to me too.

So with that in mind, I went, “Well, uh, how does it sound…?” I had to be the rudest person in the world to put the supadari on hold like this.

“Are you really suggesting that we be neither best friends nor lovers but a third option?” Mai asked.

“W-well, you did it before… You were all for having us be strangers if we couldn’t be either…”

Mai buried her face in her hands.

“Oh, is it so bad you’re at a loss for words?” I asked. “Okay, in that case, I guess I’d better—”

“No,” she said, interrupting me. “To be frank, I did not expect this

to happen, but the fact that you did not fall for me hard enough speaks to my own lack of talent. I also caused you a great deal of trouble. So I have no choice but to accept."

And then, in a surprise attack, Mai launched herself at me for a hug. I yelped.

"Goodness," she said, "this is my first time ever taking on an opponent as strong as you. You're such a fascinating girl, you know."

"No, wait," I insisted. "We're friends with Rena-fits, so we don't do this kind of thing."

"You said that as my best friend, you'd let me do what I want. That's what people call friends with benefits, right?"

"No, because we're the ones who decide what to label our relationship!"

I evaded her just moments before she could kiss me.

"Hmm," she said. "I see now."

As I dodged her, she lightly nibbled on my ear. I-I went limp! "Whoa, hey, going for the ear's a foul!"

"You seem awfully guilty that you couldn't make up your mind about which is better," she said. "So why don't we have another competition?"

"A c-competition?" I repeated.

Stop breathing in my ear, dammit! It was giving me goosebumps.

"Yes," she said. "You can insist that we should be friends with Rena-fits, and I'll once again work to make us girlfriends. I still don't intend to give up, after all. As for the time limit…let's see now." She beamed. "How about we have until we graduate?"

Her smile pinned me in place. By now, I'd learned how to handle at least a little bit of the pressure she exerted on me, but it looked like I still had a long way to go before we could stand on equal ground.

"O-okay," I said. "Fine, I'll take you up on that. But I know for sure that being friends is way better than being lovers."

I was partway through saying that when gravity suddenly lost its hold on me. I was being picked up—bridal style!

"Um, hello?!" I said.

With me in her arms, Mai sailed out of the room. “Wh-what are you doing?!” I cried. “You’re freaking me out!” I trembled with the fear that she’d drop me if I struggled. Mai carried me through the apartment before gently letting me down onto something cushiony. It was a honking enormous bed.

Wait. A bed?

“Huh?” I yelled. “What the heck is this? Why is there a huge canopy bed like out of some freaking manga?”

“This is my bedroom,” Mai explained. “I know this is sudden, but why not kick off the match now? Time for us to be dear lovers.”

“Isn’t this jumping the gun?” I cried.

Mai stretched out her hand to undo my ribbon. “We have until graduation,” she reminded me, “but why not end the match right here and now?”

Her daring grin filled my entire vision, and soon a soft sensation sealed my lips. This first kiss in a long time tasted sweet. It tasted like Mai.

“U-um…” I said.

“By the way,” she asked, “how far can we take things as friends with Rena-fits?”

“Just to kissing! Friend kissing, and that’s it!”

Relentlessly, Mai began undoing my shirt buttons one by one. *Hey now!*

“I see,” she said. “In that case, no matter how one goes about it, isn’t being lovers the better option?”

“Maybe to you!”

She exposed my bra, and when I hurried to cover my chest with my hands, she gently pushed them aside. Wait, this was a repeat of last time! And I was getting swept up in it!

“Listen, Mai, I’m not a hussy!” I blustered.

“Oh, Renako, you’re so cute.”

“No, no. No, no, no, no.” Oh my god, this was mortifying. “No, no, no! We aren’t lovers yet! It’s halftime right now! The match resumes tomorrow, in July, okay?”

"…All right." And then, just like that, Mai's hands stopped. I thought it was odd that she'd backed off so quickly, so I looked back at her, and she smiled at me *way* too calmly. Th-this freaking girl…

"I'm always happy to go as far as you want," she said.

"What, are you trying to flip the script on me?"

Mai hugged me to her, enveloping me completely in her arms, and whispered in my ear. "If we were lovers, we could be like this every day. I would have eyes only for you, and I'd shower you with my affection every single day. How about it? You and me, naked in bed, swaying together in each other's arms forever?"

"E-every day, you said…?"

I looked up into Mai's perfectly sculpted face and gulped. I knew I would lose my mind if Mai gave me that kind of pleasure.

Then I yanked the sheet up around me and screamed, "Nope! If we're not best friends, then no freaking way!"

And thus, my competition with Mai came to an end…but our new battle was only beginning.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

This is my first time writing a romantic story about two girls in a professional capacity.

My *This Is a Story of a Girl Who Insists It's Ridiculous to Date Another Girl but Falls Head Over Heels in 100 Days* story was published by GA Bunko on February 14th. When I was thinking about it being picked up from its original doujinshi format, I came up with this story as a genuine, professionally published work: *There's No Freaking Way I'll be Your Lover! Unless…?* In Japanese, that's "Watanare" for short.

By the way, don't you think a cute girl in love is really cute? (Yes, she is.) When she blushes in embarrassment and works so hard for the person she loves, isn't that cute? (Yes, it is.) So if a cute girl falls in love with another cute girl, isn't that *double* the cuteness? And with that thought process, I created this work, the embodiment of a cry of "Eureka!" so loud it'd shock even Archimedes.

Here's the premise: In fact, even cute girls like cute girls. That popular girl in school, the cute actress you see on TV, this idol—they're all so bright and friendly. Imagine how fun it'd be to be friends with one of them. But wait, hold on a sec. Isn't it backwards for those girls to like *me*?!

I wrote a story of this main character's futile struggle…ahem, I mean, brave attempts to stick to her beliefs. This is a story where our protagonist Renako is searching for the perfect friend while Mai searches for the perfect lover. Even while they compete with one another, they still try to find common ground…or, I guess, they work to find the best possible ending for both of them. Of course, they both do lots of unforgivable things to each other along the way. So there's a bit of a crazy tug-of-war with each trying to drag each other into their home territory… And this Mai girl, see, is a strong puller. You know, her whole socializing ability is off the charts. She's the cream of the crop in this cast of pretty girls. A complete SSR. Renako never stood a chance!

But Renako has one powerful weapon. That's right, it's the

strength of being loved! …Yeah, it's not really the courage and irreproachable heart kind of crud protagonists are supposed to have. Does Renako even have any of that…? Well, that's for all of you readers to decide!

It's currently 2020, and both the decade and the era have just changed, so things are a little nuts. This romcom is a little nuts too, but I hope you don't think about it too much and have a good time with it!

Okay, now that I've calmed down a bit, time for all the usual acknowledgments. This time, I'd like to thank Eku Takeshima-san who so graciously provided the illustrations. I've been a fan of hers for aaaaages. First there was Mai's gorgeous and quirky design. Then she drew Renako, who looks so real, as if Amaori Renako really exists somewhere and Takeshima-san copied her onto the page. I love all her many adorable characters.

I'd also like to thank my editor K. Hara-san who invited me to this. I was nervous about tackling yuri in a professional context, but she gave me the encouragement to try. Thank you very much. I know I was such a thorn in your side the whole time, but with your help, I was able to do a wonderful job. Please continue to assist me from here on out.

Also, thank you to the many people involved in making this book and all the authors who offer me support on a regular basis. Above all else, a huge thank you to everyone who picked up this book and all the bookstore staff who worked hard to sell it. Thanks to all your efforts, I can get by today, tomorrow, and probably even the day after that too.

I hope you'll come away from this book feeling entertained somehow. And now, I hope to see you around somewhere! Teren Mikami, signing off!

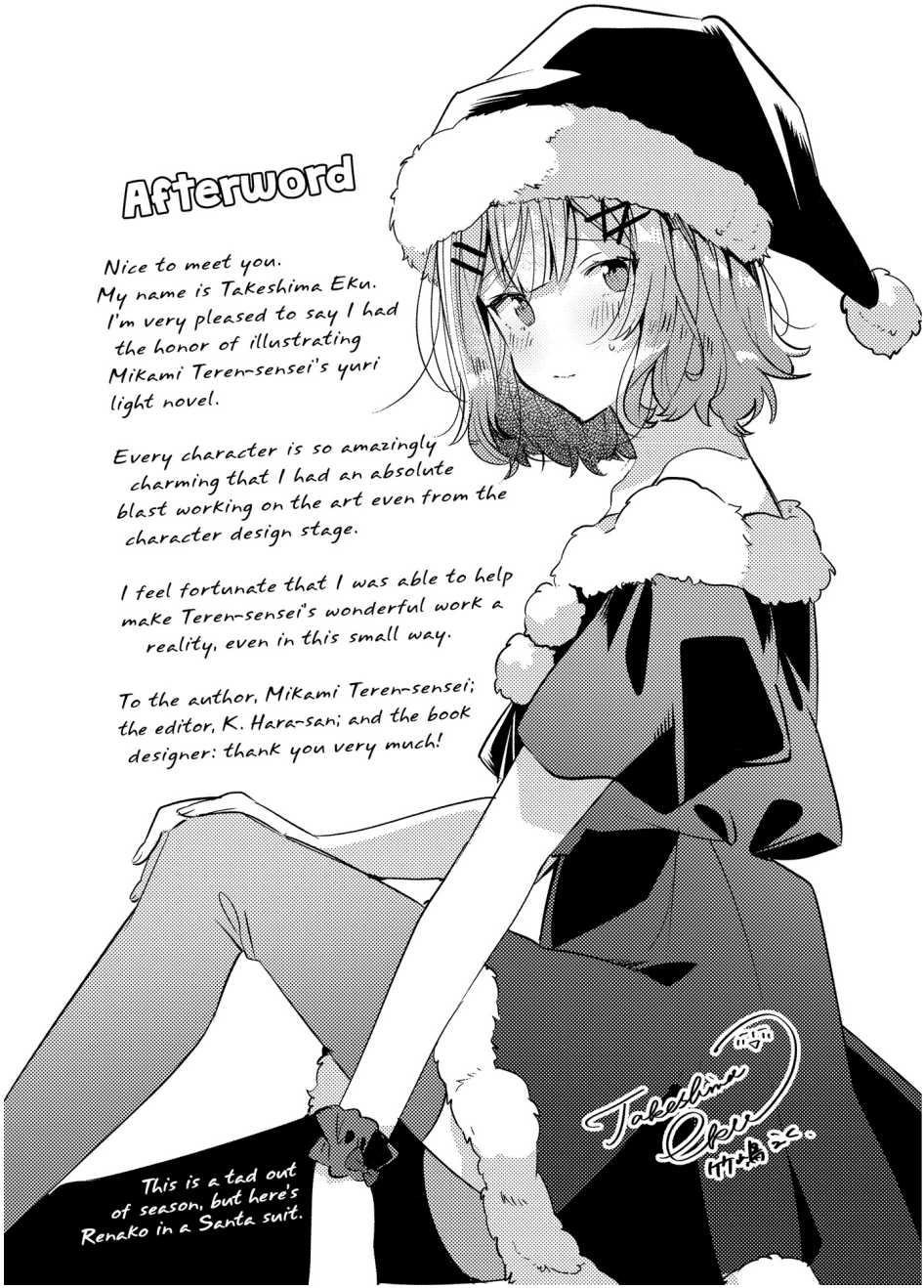
Afterword

Nice to meet you.
My name is Takeshima Eku.
I'm very pleased to say I had the honor of illustrating Mikami Teren-sensei's yuri light novel.

Every character is so amazingly charming that I had an absolute blast working on the art even from the character design stage.

I feel fortunate that I was able to help make Teren-sensei's wonderful work a reality, even in this small way.

To the author, Mikami Teren-sensei; the editor, K. Hara-san; and the book designer: thank you very much!



Creator Bios

AUTHOR BIO

Mikami Teren

BORN ON DECEMBER 16 IN SAITAMA

I love girls loving one another so much! A yuri-loving editor scouted me while I was losing my mind (my eyes got all spinny!) and making a ton of yuri doujinshi.

My favorite food is ramen.

It's all going to be okay, because this is a Mikami Teren yuri book!

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Takeshima Eku

BORN ON APRIL 23 IN OKAYAMA

A manga artist who loves drawing fluffy yuri.

All the characters were so adorable that I had fun drawing them all! Thank you for this opportunity!

Thank you for reading!

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